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*Evangelicalism, cultural influences and theological change;  
considered with special reference to the thought of Thomas Rawson  
Birks (1810 - 1883).*

Ralph Stuart Brown B. A. (Hons.)

Department of Religious Studies, The Open University.

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Author no. M2822708  
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### Abstract

This thesis presents a detailed analysis of the thought of the leading nineteenth century Anglican Evangelical theologian Thomas Rawson Birks (1810-1883). It is organised on a broadly chronological basis and discusses Birks's dogmatic and philosophical theology, sermons, and journalism. It also takes full account of his contributions to contemporary debates on social, political and scientific issues, considering them in relation to their cultural and ideological context.

The study presents an assessment of the nature and importance of Birks's theological output. It also considers Birks's thought in relation to the changing character of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism itself and to the wider question of the relationship between cultural influences and theological change.

The thesis will argue that Birks's distinctive interpretations of central Evangelical doctrines represented an original and important contribution to the Evangelical tradition. Birks's career also reflects some prominent ideological tendencies and concerns through which the religious character of the Evangelical movement as a whole can be better understood. Finally, this thesis aims to demonstrate that Birks's intellectual and scientific interests, philosophical outlook and religious sensibility reveal him to have been a representative product of mainstream Victorian culture.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Claude Welch has observed that 'the theological situation of the twentieth century is peculiarly dependent on the developments of the nineteenth century'.<sup>1</sup> He might equally have argued that our understanding of the history of nineteenth-century religious thought is particularly dependent upon contemporary theological preoccupations and concerns. Recent historians have, for example, largely concentrated their attention on praising what, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, appear to have been the vital creative innovations in nineteenth-century Anglican thought, often neglecting the work of those Churchmen regarded as representatives of an outmoded religious orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the Evangelical contribution to Victorian intellectual life is

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<sup>1</sup>Welch, C., 'The Problem of a History of Nineteenth-Century Theology', *Journal of Religion*, 1972, 52, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>E. g. Reardon, B. M. G., *From Coleridge to Gore: A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (London, 1971). As the title of this book implies, Reardon sets his discussion of the period within a framework dictated by a consideration of the work of the leading innovators from the liberal and Anglo-Catholic parties.

assumed to have been negligible.<sup>3</sup> Evangelicals have been presented as ignorant, reactionary and 'profoundly anti-intellectual'.<sup>4</sup> Their alleged veneration of emotion over reason, it is argued, prevented Evangelicals from mounting an effective intellectual response to the critical approaches to Scripture typified by *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and the work of Bishop Colenso.<sup>5</sup>

However, important recent scholarship has sought to reappraise the development of Evangelical thought. Boyd Hilton has presented a reconsideration of the intellectual and social influence of Evangelical religion, discussing the importance of Evangelical theology in shaping public policy during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> David Bebbington, in the first major modern academic history of British Evangelicalism, has interpreted Evangelical theology and spirituality within its broader cultural context.<sup>7</sup>

E. M. Culbertson, writing from an Anglican Evangelical perspective, has also sought to defend the intellectual sophistication and scholarly achievements of some leading nineteenth-century Evangelical Churchmen.<sup>8</sup> He has provided a valuable survey of this neglected field of study but has focused on a rather narrow range of printed sources, which are largely discussed in isolation from their wider cultural context, and he consequently presents a simplified and somewhat distorted view of nineteenth-century Evangelical thought.

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<sup>3</sup>The capitalized form of this noun will be used in this study to refer to the Evangelical Protestant 'movement' as a whole. While the focus of the thesis is primarily upon the development of Anglican Evangelicalism, this is to be set firmly within the context of traditions and influences that crossed denominational boundaries. For the implications of alternative usages see Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 278.

<sup>4</sup>Prickett, S., *Romanticism and Religion, The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 253.

<sup>5</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Responses to 'Essays and Reviews', 1860-1864' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume IV, Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 28-40.

<sup>6</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>Culbertson, E. M., 'Evangelical Theology, 1857-1900', PhD. thesis, King's College London, 1991.

This thesis presents a reappraisal of the thought of the 'leading dogmatic Evangelical theologian'<sup>9</sup> T. R. Birks (1810-1883) and aims, through the detailed analysis of his work, to present a more rounded picture of the complexities of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism. It will, in particular, seek to analyse and to interpret the role of premillennial adventism in the development of Evangelical theology. It will also study Birks's output in order to investigate some of the wider dimensions of Evangelical thought, including political and social attitudes, and addresses the debate concerning the relationship between Evangelicalism and its social and cultural context stimulated by the work of Hilton and Bebbington.

The thesis takes the form of a chronological account of Birks's career. Within this overall structure, there are three major themes that will also be explored:

#### 1. The historical significance of Birks's career

Birks has been chosen for the purposes of this study as he was a respected leader of the Anglican Evangelical party and, by the mid-nineteenth century, its foremost academic theologian.<sup>10</sup> He was also active in the major Evangelical societies and campaigning organizations and was a prolific polemicist, speaking for the Evangelical clergy on many of the controversial issues of his day.

Birks's active church career, from the 1830s to the 1870s, conveniently spans the period usually characterized as the 'Victorian era'<sup>11</sup> and his publications thus provide a useful perspective from which to assess the Evangelical role in some of the major intellectual controversies of that period.

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>10</sup>In a disparaging survey of anti-ritualist literature, Gerard Manley Hopkins observed that, 'At Hampstead lives almost the only learned Evangelical going, Mr. Birks.' Letter to Rev. E. W. Urquhart, 1865, in Abbott, C. C., *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (second edition, London, 1956), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>E. g. Houghton, W. E., *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-70* (New Haven, 1957).

Birks was, for example, one of the most prominent clerical opponents of the evolutionary ideas of Darwin and Spencer.

Birks was also one of the leading Anglican prophetic scholars and the pattern of his early published output is representative of the way in which adventism had been assimilated into Evangelical theology and spirituality. Birks's involvement in anti-Catholic agitation and pan-Evangelicalism further reflects the broader influence of adventism upon the Evangelical mentality.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Birks was one of the few 'conservative' religious thinkers who felt impelled to articulate serious philosophical responses to the moral criticisms of conventional dogma being made by intellectual radicals and Broad Churchmen. He mounted philosophical defences of the fall, the eternal punishment of the unregenerate and of Scriptural miracles. He also defended the concept of supernatural revelation in the face of challenges by Positivist writers.

Birks also made distinctive and innovatory contributions to the interpretation of Evangelical doctrine. Bishop Moule, a leading figure in later nineteenth-century Anglican Evangelicalism, recalled that Birks had 'a subtle mind of restless energy' and was 'a worshipping student of the Scriptures, in whom the speculative and reverential elements were remarkably fused together'.<sup>12</sup> Birks sought to move beyond the crude legalism of conventional Evangelical apologetics and to present expositions of the doctrines of the atonement and justification that were centred on individual faith in the incarnation. He also promoted an interpretation of the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the unregenerate that emphasized that the fate of the lost reflected divine mercy, as well as divine justice.

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<sup>12</sup>Moule, H. C. G., *The Evangelical School in the Church of England* (London, 1901), p. 16.

## 2. The changing nature of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism

Birks's career in the Church covered a period of transition in British Evangelicalism during which adventist views made a major impact upon Evangelical thought. From the 1820s, the rising generation of educated Evangelicals was being drawn towards the adventism of Edward Irving (1792 - 1834). They were sympathetic to Irving's compelling Manichaean outlook and welcomed his condemnation of the accommodating expediency of the Simeonite Evangelical establishment, which he had attacked for compromising its Protestant heritage in return for political gains. Birks, who came originally from a Baptist family and joined the Church of England on entering Cambridge University, in 1830, claimed that his own study of Irving's writings had been responsible for transforming his attitude towards the Anglican Church.<sup>13</sup>

Irving had claimed that Evangelicalism was losing ground because of 'the soft and effeminate' leadership 'of this generation of saints', with their 'political and expedient spirit', their 'zeal for parliamentary questions' and 'willingness to compromise with the powers of this present world'.<sup>14</sup> His popularity also owed much to the way in which his preaching appealed to the striking parallels between Biblical prophecy and recent European history and dwelt upon hopes of an imminent personal return of Christ and the promised glory of his elect.

As a result of eschatological differences, Evangelicalism became increasingly divided and sectarian in emphasis.<sup>15</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, it has been argued, continuing eschatological disputes had issued in what have

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<sup>13</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, July 27 1883. Birks's Church career is discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 7.

<sup>14</sup>Irving, E., *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these latter times, and until the second advent* (second edition, Glasgow, 1828), p. 424.

<sup>15</sup>Hempton, D., 'Evangelicals and eschatology', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 31, 2, 1980, pp. 179 - 194.

been identified as distinct 'conservative' and 'liberal' Evangelical positions.

According to Hilton, premillennial adventists like Birks were driven into adopting increasingly extreme 'conservative' positions because of their obsession with special providences, which prevented them from making any accommodation with modern scientific culture. Yet Hylson-Smith has suggested that Birks's views on the afterlife identify him with a more innovative 'liberal Evangelical position'.<sup>16</sup> Rowell and Culbertson have also interpreted his views on the afterlife within the framework of the development of 'liberal' Anglican theology.<sup>17</sup>

The approach of these historians typifies the common tendency to conceive the intellectual history of the nineteenth century in terms of the inevitable triumph of a 'liberal' scientific, political and religious world view. Individuals thus tend to be categorized according to how far their publications were sympathetic to 'liberalism' or antagonistic towards it.

Evangelicals themselves only began to use the term 'liberal Evangelicalism' from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long after Birks's death, and historians who have set Birks's thought within the context of 'liberal' Anglicanism, have consequently underestimated the importance of premillennialism in the development of his theology. Birks himself attributed the development of his particular interpretation of 'moderate Calvinism' and his innovative views on the future state specifically to his prophetic studies of the 1840s.<sup>18</sup>

Birks's eschatology continued to emphasize divine judgement and punishment for past sins. He rejected conditionalism, the various forms of progressive redemption and universalist hopes that were being promoted by

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<sup>16</sup>Hylson-Smith, K., *Evangelicals in the Church of England* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 139.

<sup>17</sup>Rowell, G., *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1974), p. 128 and Culbertson, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870), p. 12.

'liberal' theologians. He also continued to maintain a highly supernaturalist view of Christianity and the absolute authority of Scripture, attempting to refute the results of 'higher' criticism. Nonetheless, despite these 'conservative' aspects of his thought, Birks was criticized by some of his Evangelical contemporaries for adopting unorthodox interpretations of the doctrines of the fall, the atonement and eternal punishment.

### 3. Cultural influences and theological change

This thesis aims to follow the approach of those modern religious historians who have sought to move away from interpreting nineteenth-century church history in terms of contemporary religious programmes. This is not to say that any historian can be completely objective or that history cannot illuminate modern religious debates. Nonetheless, the theological intentions of men like Birks need to be understood on their own terms, and in relation to the cultural context that shaped them, before their significance for the present can be assessed.

History has been of central importance to the Evangelical movement, serving a defining and legitimating function. It has also usually served theological ends, as the workings of divine providence have been traced in the development of Evangelical churches. Joseph Milner's influential *History of the Church of Christ* (1794 - 1797) had seen the work of the Holy Spirit in history simply in terms of the pious lives led by individual Christians.<sup>19</sup> From the early nineteenth century, however, the new generation of Evangelical adventists began to interpret specific historical events as a series of direct divine interventions in human affairs, as predicted in Biblical prophecy. It was believed that the Book of

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<sup>19</sup>Walsh, J. D., 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical Church History', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 10, 1959, pp. 174 - 187.

Revelation foretold, in precise detail, the historical battle between God and Satan, the 'true' Church and the Anti-Christian apostasy. Birks declared that the Apocalypse provided 'a connected and continuous record of events to occur during the long suspension of the visible theocracy'.<sup>20</sup>

E. B. Elliott's popular exposition of Revelation, *Horae Apocalypticæ* (1844), detailed the Providential expansion of the Victorian church through missionary efforts and, Orchard observes, this 'was how Elliott and his friends liked to gloss Evangelical history and the understanding of it has been coloured by their view to the present day'.<sup>21</sup> Evangelical revivals, in particular, have been interpreted as especially decisive acts of divine intervention in human affairs.<sup>22</sup>

From the later nineteenth century, Anglican Evangelical history increasingly took the form of a campaign to defend and restore the 'Protestant' Anglican tradition in the face of the vigorous Catholic revival.<sup>23</sup> It emphasized the theological inheritance of the sixteenth-century Reformation and sought to elevate Evangelicals like Simeon to a status equivalent to that of the Anglo-Catholic leaders Keble and Newman. Simeon, John Kent suggests, was 'really the invention' of 'historians in search of a suitable 'ecclesiastical hero'.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, some historians have sought to present Evangelical history in relation to secular factors, emphasizing the ways in which socio-economic and cultural influences have shaped its development. The conventional notion of what Kent has described as a 'closed Evangelical sub-culture' is now clearly outmoded.<sup>25</sup> Bebbington has argued that Evangelicalism was a product of

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<sup>20</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Letters on Prophecy', *Churchman*, July 1843, p. 472.

<sup>21</sup>Orchard, S. C., 'English Evangelical eschatology, 1790-1850', PhD. thesis, Cambridge, 1969, p. 181.

<sup>22</sup>E. g. the account of the eighteenth-century Evangelical revival, as a merciful divine 'intervention' granted to a 'corrupt' nation, in Poole - Connor, E. J., *Evangelicalism in England* (London, 1951), pp. 149 - 175.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Brown, R. S., 'The Evangelical Succession ? Evangelical history and denominational identity', *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. LXVIII, no. 1, January 1996, pp. 3-6.

<sup>24</sup>Kent, J., *The Unacceptable Face* (London, 1987), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.



mainstream Enlightenment culture.<sup>26</sup> During the early nineteenth century, the Romantic movement was to influence the 'whole temper' of Evangelical theology.<sup>27</sup>

The example of Birks's career demonstrates that the changing cultural environment produced a complex process of ideological transition, as characteristically Romantic sensibilities were actually accommodated with some enduring aspects of an older framework of enduring *Enlightenment attitudes and modes of thought*. Indeed, *Birks's thought brings to mind* Reardon's suggestion that it is 'arguable that classical and romantic are simply convenient labels to apply to different outlooks and attitudes of mind that exist in all ages and quite often in the same individual'.<sup>28</sup>

Many aspects of Birks's outlook can be regarded as Romantic, notably his fervent adventism and concern for the past and its spiritual purity. The typical, and paradoxical, Romantic appeal<sup>29</sup> combined a stress on individualism, which convinced men like Birks that their own personal interpretations of prophetic scriptures were of unique importance, with a strong sense of tradition - a feeling that the forces of religion and politics had an overriding duty to keep the excesses of individual reason in check.<sup>30</sup> By the 1860s Birks had also developed a view of the central Evangelical doctrine of the atonement that reflected the Romantic influence both in its emphasis on incarnational religion and its concern to stress the attractiveness of goodness rather than the victory over evil.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Bebbington, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-74.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 143-6.

<sup>28</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., 'Religion and the Romantic Movement', *Theology*, 1973, p. 403.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 411-2.

<sup>30</sup>In Evangelical polemic this was articulated in terms of a crusade against the 'great Liberal movement' (Birks, T. R., *Church and State* (London, 1869), p. 51) which encompassed secular philosophy, broad church theology and popular radicalism.

<sup>31</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God* (London, 1863).

Yet, even at this stage of his career, Birks still continued to emphasize the importance of Biblical evidences, popularized in the eighteenth century, as well as the natural theology of Paley, which the 'Albury school' and the Irvingites had abandoned in favour of a simple trust in divine revelation. The legacy of Enlightenment thought can still be seen as late as the 1870s when, in response to Tyndall's infamous challenge to the Victorian clerical establishment, Birks provided a convoluted and idiosyncratic theory explaining the efficacy of prayer in terms of the operation of natural laws.<sup>32</sup>

Birks's published output also demonstrates that adventist expectations and veneration of the Bible did not, as has often been assumed, necessarily serve to isolate Evangelicals from active participation in contemporary intellectual life. Throughout his career he produced well-informed philosophical and scientific works that were substantial contributions to topical debates.

In its adoption of a biographical approach, this study is taking one of the most common approaches to the history of theology. Historians have tended either to concentrate upon the study of a particular theological 'school' or church party, as Culbertson has done, or to analyse the work of an individual Churchman.<sup>33</sup>

Both approaches have their advantages and limitations. Studies of church parties can be prone to generalization and simplification. They also tend to adopt a periodization that stresses particular 'controversies' at the expense of continuities and more gradual developments. The history of nineteenth-century church parties has focused upon particular controversies, such as that following

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<sup>32</sup>Birks, T. R., *Thoughts on the Sacraments and on the Relations of Prayer and Science* (London, 1873).

<sup>33</sup>E. g. Farley, I. D., 'J. C. Ryle, episcopal evangelist, a study in late Victorian Evangelicalism', PhD. thesis, Durham, 1988.

the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, which have been seen as critical 'turning points' in the religious history of the period.<sup>34</sup> However, in the light of Bebbington's study, the involvement of Evangelical Churchmen in such controversies can be seen to be part of a complex intellectual transition in contemporary thought and culture.

Studies of church parties may also neglect notions like theological mood and temper - the general intellectual climate can be just as important as internal church developments. Biographies allow more room to analyse actual theologising, to study in detail how ideas developed and how they were shaped by the distinct influences acting upon an individual in a particular situation.

A common problem with historical surveys of church parties is their tendency to classify the views of individual churchmen in terms of what Welch describes as the "'spectrum view'" of theology.<sup>35</sup> The idea of a spectrum of religious opinion, analogous to the right and left 'wings' of modern political life, has gained common currency, with nineteenth-century religion usually being presented as a struggle between 'conservative' and 'liberal' opinion. Yet, as Welch points out, these terms can often be misleading and can divert attention from the actual theological intentions of contemporary thinkers. The notion of a single spectrum upon which all theological positions could conveniently be placed is a distortion - the situation was more complex and contemporary theologians did not set out to be either 'conservative' or 'liberal' but responded to a wide variety of pressures and influences.

The drawbacks of the spectrum view of theological history are also evident in Hilton's division of the Evangelical party into a moderate 'Claphamite'

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<sup>34</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Responses to *Essays and Reviews*, 1860-1864', in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. iv; *Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 28-40.

<sup>35</sup>Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

and an extreme 'Recordite' faction.<sup>36</sup> These labels have been widely accepted as a convenient means of classifying Evangelical clergymen and it has become somewhat difficult to avoid using such terms. Yet, once again, Birks's theological output will demonstrate that it is problematic to attempt to see rigid distinctions between these groups, as divisions between them come down to matters of tone and emphasis rather than clear doctrinal differences.

This study also seeks to avoid a major potential pitfall of the biographical approach - the tendency to pay insufficient attention to the wider historical context of intellectual developments. Recent scholarship has shown, for example, how the nineteenth-century debates concerning evolution cannot be considered in isolation from the social, political and economic context of the period.<sup>37</sup> The theology, as well as the science, of the period needs to be understood in relation to the wider cultural context in an approach which Robert Young has described as 'social intellectual history'.<sup>38</sup>

Intellectual history becomes bland and superficial if divorced from the forces that shaped it and this study aims to keep the socio-political, religious and cultural context of Birks's thought clearly in focus. It will be based upon a close reading and analysis of Birks's theological output, setting it firmly within the social and intellectual environment of Victorian Britain, taking account of the views of other contemporary religious thinkers, philosophers and scientists.

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<sup>36</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement*, pp. 10 - 15. Hilton reapplied a label coined by Conybeare for what he had interpreted as an exaggerated form of Evangelicalism where justification by faith had become antinomianism, conversion by grace a shallow predestinarian fatalism and Scripture as the sole rule of faith had degenerated into dogmatic verbal inspiration. Conybeare, W. J., 'Church Parties', *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 98, October 1853, pp. 273-342.

<sup>37</sup>E. g. Moore, J. R., 'Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia', in Helmstadter, R. J. and Lightman, B., (eds.), *Victorian Faith in Crisis* (London, 1990), pp. 153-86.

<sup>38</sup>Young, R. M., 'The Historiographic and Ideological context of the nineteenth century debate on man's place in nature', in Teich, M. and Young, R. M., (eds.), *Changing Perspectives in the History of Science* (London, 1973), p. 351.

The archival material relating to Birks is limited. It has been possible to trace, through marriage and probate records, some significant documents in the possession of his direct descendants. These collections include the legal documents concerning Birks's clerical career and family correspondence.<sup>39</sup> These sources provide important information concerning Birks's family background, student interests and religious doubts during his early career. Public and academic libraries also contain other important correspondence by Birks and his contemporaries.

The archival records of religious societies and organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance (1846) provide additional material and the thesis also makes use of other relevant contextual sources including the leading Anglican and Evangelical newspapers and periodicals. However, as the thesis takes the form of an intellectual biography of Birks, the primary focus of the study will be a detailed consideration of Birks's dogmatic and philosophical theology, sermons and journalism.

The study begins with an initial survey of the major developments in early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism and then proceeds to discuss how Birks's early career was shaped by the religious and political atmosphere of the 1830s. This is followed by a more detailed analysis of Birks's church activity and theological publications during the 1830s and 1840s, focusing in particular upon the influence of Irvingism and Birks's role in the religious controversies and political debates of this period. These chapters develop a major finding of the thesis, demonstrating the vital role of adventism as a driving force in shaping the changing character of nineteenth-century Evangelical theology and spirituality.

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<sup>39</sup>The legal documents are in the possession of Mrs. M. Tobin of Surrey and the family correspondence is owned by Dr. P. R. Birks of Bedfordshire.

The other major section of the study concerns Birks's role as a polemicist and theologian during the 1860s and 1870s, the period of the mid-Victorian 'crisis of faith', reflecting upon the Evangelical role in nineteenth-century intellectual life. It aims to present an interpretation of this period that does not simply view the Evangelical role as a purely defensive one in a 'conflict' with science and 'liberal' theology, but to demonstrate how Evangelicals like Birks were part of the intellectual mainstream and that their attitudes and opinions were shaped by the same influences, and often moving in similar directions, as those of many of their 'liberal' contemporaries.

Culbertson, for instance, has assumed that Victorian Evangelicalism was 'at variance' with 'Coleridge and the romantic movement'. He maintained that 'Idealist philosophy also was not taken up by Evangelicals'. Both in *Lux Mundi* and in evolutionary thought, he declares, 'it was strenuously opposed by Payne Smith and Birks'.<sup>40</sup> This thesis will argue that Romanticism was, in fact, a key factor in shaping Birks's outlook and that Idealism was a major element in his philosophical approach, actually forming the basis of his careful theological argument against the Darwinists.

This study of Birks's career aims to present a thorough and non-partisan assessment of the nature and importance of his theological output. It will also analyse Birks's career in order to understand how the Evangelical system of belief functioned and for the light it throws upon some prominent ideological tendencies and concerns through which the religious character of the Evangelical movement as a whole can be better understood. Finally, the study addresses the current historiographical debate concerning the complex relationship between Evangelical thought and cultural change. It aims to challenge the common

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<sup>40</sup>Culbertson, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

assumption that a narrow biblicism effectively isolated Evangelicals from contemporary cultural trends and intellectual developments.

Part One: 1810 - 1860



## CHAPTER II

### **Evangelical theology and its cultural context: the early career of T. R. Birks**

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the historiographical discussion of the relationship between early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism and its cultural context. It then proceeds to consider how the intellectual and religious climate of the 1820s and 1830s shaped Birks's intellectual outlook and his subsequent publications from the 1840s and 1850s. Birks's early career, it will be argued, demonstrates that Evangelical thought was deeply affected by new developments in contemporary intellectual and cultural life.

Historians of Evangelicalism have predominantly interpreted the movement as essentially sectarian in character, rejecting prevailing social and cultural values. It was assumed to have originated as a popular religious movement reacting against the moral and ethical standards of eighteenth-century society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Balleine, G. R., *A History of The Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London, 1933), pp. 12-49.

Bebbington's work has recently refocused attention on conventional assumptions regarding the oppositional relationship between Evangelicalism and society. He has emphasized the vital role of 'cultural diffusion' in shaping the history of Evangelical religion, maintaining that the 'crucial determinants of change' in Evangelical Protestantism 'have been the successive cultural waves that have broken over Western civilisation since the late seventeenth century'.<sup>2</sup>

Bebbington argues that Evangelicalism was a recognizable product of the Enlightenment, 'an expression of the age of reason'.<sup>3</sup> Its spirituality reflected, in particular, the empirical Lockean outlook of the English Enlightenment. Wesley's application of empiricist philosophy to religious experience was especially important in shaping the distinctive Methodist doctrine of assurance, a conviction that spurred the characteristic activism of the Evangelical movement.<sup>4</sup> His opposition to 'systems' of confessional orthodoxy, his pragmatic methods and optimism concerning the progress of the gospel have also been identified as typical Enlightenment attitudes.<sup>5</sup>

Bebbington's analysis challenges the traditional view that Evangelicalism represented a 'reaction' against the 'eighteenth century and its rationalism', a turning from reason to emotion.<sup>6</sup> Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment have generally been regarded as 'polar opposites'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Evangelicalism, as essentially a religion of the heart, has been interpreted by some writers as an early manifestation of what came to be described as the Romantic movement.

F. D. Maurice, for instance, identified a philosophical revolution, originating in

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<sup>2</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 271-6.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup>Ward, W. R., *Faith and Faction*, (London, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Kitson-Clark, G. S. R., 'The Romantic Element, 1830-1850', in Plumb, J. H. (ed.), *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan* (London, 1955), p. 231.

<sup>7</sup>Tholfsen, T. R., *Working Class Radicalism in mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976), p. 61.

the mid-eighteenth century, and which was reflected in the Methodist conviction that man was essentially a spiritual being, not a mechanism but a being with values and a purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Bebbington argues, however, that an emphasis upon emotion, otherworldliness and moments of intense fervour were not central elements of the Evangelical revival but were actually 'novelties in the years around 1830'. He maintains that 'Reason, not emotion, had been the lodestar of the Evangelicals; many of them looked to the millennium of the future, not to the past, for their ideal of a Christian society; and far from wishing to flee from existing conditions, they used normal contemporary methods, whether in business, politics or religion, to accomplish their aims'.<sup>9</sup> The impact of Romanticism was, according to Bebbington, a major influence upon Evangelical spirituality, but it only came to prominence from the 1820s and 1830s. These decades saw the rise of a narrower and more partisan form of Evangelicalism as the Enlightenment values of Wesley, and the subsequent generation of Evangelical Anglicans known as the Clapham Sect, were superseded by new Romantic elements in Evangelical thought, 'revolutionising the inherited outlook'.<sup>10</sup>

The revolutionary cultural impact of Romanticism is widely acknowledged. Reardon has declared that it was 'as decisive a revolution in ideas as were the events of 1789 in politics'.<sup>11</sup> It is claimed to have provided 'a radical discontinuity with everything that preceded' it by offering access to a 'new world

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<sup>8</sup>Maurice, F. D., *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838), quoted in Prickett, S., *Romanticism and Religion, The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 131.

<sup>9</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism*, p. 81. Mark Pattison observed that eighteenth century Evangelical preachers 'certainly insisted on "the heart" being touched, and that the Spirit only had the power savingly to affect the heart; but they acted as though this were done by an appeal to the reason'; Pattison, M., 'Tendencies of Religious Thought in England 1688 - 1750' in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), p. 326.

<sup>10</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism*, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., 'Religion and the Romantic Movement', *Theology*, Aug. 1973, p. 410.

of the spirit'.<sup>12</sup> Yet attempts to define Romanticism and analyse the precise nature of its influence upon intellectual and religious life have proved to be more elusive.<sup>13</sup> Although the early nineteenth century is generally regarded as the great Romantic era, it is also recognized that, even in this period, there was a great variety of thought and art that could be classified as Romantic. It is even possible to argue that Romanticism was not a sudden intellectual revolution but 'a recombination, in a new context, of elements already present in eighteenth century thought'.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly an essential feature of the Romantic attitude was a growing awareness of the inadequacies of Enlightenment rationalism, a feeling that the order of the Newtonian universe was not simply self-explanatory and self-justifying, together with a yearning, typified by Wordsworth's verse, to discover the infinite and eternal truths lying behind outward forms.<sup>15</sup> In Romantic art and philosophy reason did not provide the key to truth; knowledge was believed to come through feeling. In the religious sphere this was expressed in terms of a rejection of both the rationalistic dogmatism of the orthodox and the natural religion of the Deists in favour of an emphasis upon personal experience and emotion.

The influential German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834) had urged intellectual doubters to look beyond orthodox dogma and conventional piety, to 'turn from everything usually reckoned religion' and to fix their 'regard on the inward emotions and dispositions'. He advocated the

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<sup>12</sup>Shea, F. X., 'Religion and the Romantic Movement', *Studies in Romanticism*, 9, 1970, p. 285-6.

<sup>13</sup>E. g. Lovejoy, A. O., 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms', in *Essays on the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1948) and Reardon, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup>Tholfsen, *op. cit.*, p. 75. Hampson observes that the works of Rousseau and the cult of 'sensibility' might suggest that the reaction against the Enlightenment 'preceded most of the major works of the Enlightenment itself' (*The Enlightenment*, London, 1968), p. 187.

<sup>15</sup>Reardon, *op. cit.*, pp. 404-405.

'affectional transposition of doctrine' to reflect 'the sacred mysteries of humanity'.<sup>16</sup> Schleiermacher's approach later reached an English audience largely through the published works of S. T. Coleridge (1772 - 1834). Coleridge had based his apologetic interpretation of Christianity on his famous distinction between 'reason' and 'understanding' - through the 'understanding' experimental knowledge was acquired from sense impressions, while 'reason' enabled man to recognize intuitive religious truths that were beyond empirical verification.

The intellectual interpretation of religious truth was thus becoming more subjective and belief was justified in terms of the '*place of feeling and intuition in human perception*' and 'the importance of nature and history for human experience'. Religion was seen in terms of a heightened supernaturalism that fostered new attitudes towards the church and its work, public issues, and the purposes of God.<sup>17</sup>

Such Romantic sensibilities initially affected an educated social elite, who were particularly receptive to new cultural influences, and were subsequently transmitted through their influence to the wider religious community. Among educated Evangelicals they were focused around the rapid growth, from the 1820s, of premillennial adventism. The pious expectation of the imminent personal return of Christ, to establish his millennial kingdom on earth and personally supervise the evangelization of the world, was easily assimilated into a Romantic outlook that readily accepted that the supernatural could break into the natural world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Schleiermacher, F. D. E., *On Religion: Addresses to the Cultured among its Despisers* (1799), quoted in Pelikan, J., *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 5 'Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)' (Chicago and London, 1989), p. 174.

<sup>17</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup>Bebbington, D. W., 'The Advent Hope in British Evangelicalism since 1800', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 1988, p. 104.

Adventist hopes also reflected the Romantic yearning for more intense spiritual experiences and the pervading mood of pessimism and social alienation. Evangelicals were increasingly disillusioned with the perceived failure of their home mission, prevailing secularity and Christian divisions.<sup>19</sup> This widespread sense of unease stimulated a greater emphasis upon tradition that led the new generation of Evangelicals to strive to reach back into history for a purer, reformed faith.

Evangelicals influenced by the preaching of Edward Irving were adopting a literalist approach to prophetic interpretation. Irving had insisted that he and his followers were primarily concerned to pay closer attention 'to the letter of the word of God'.<sup>20</sup> Returning to the 'spirit of prophecy' meant, Irving claimed, that Evangelicals must reject the accommodating, progressive, approach to promoting the gospel that had been the strategy of the 'soft-hearted optimists', and should 'set the battle in array against' infidelity and the 'papal superstition'.<sup>21</sup>

The Evangelical experience also corresponds to the pattern, identified by Reardon, of Romantic elements in the theology of the Oxford Movement which were centred upon a combination of dogmatic traditionalism with an essential individualism.<sup>22</sup> An increasing proportion of Evangelicals became more dogmatic, particularly in their Calvinistic emphasis upon Divine sovereignty. They were also more prone to be stridently anti-Catholic and politically conservative. Yet they also had an increasing tendency to otherworldliness and a fascination with inventive, and often eccentric, interpretations of Biblical prophecy.

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<sup>19</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>20</sup>Irving, E., *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these latter times, and until the second advent* (second edition, Glasgow, 1828), p. 425.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 427-8.

<sup>22</sup>Reardon, 'Romanticism and Religion', p. 412.

Romanticism had a dual-edged, paradoxical, effect upon Evangelical theology, fostering a more dogmatic, Calvinistic, anti-rationalist and intolerant approach, but also a marked softening of orthodoxy, with some Evangelicals promoting milder views of the character of God, viewing Christ more as a moral example than a sacrificial martyr and placing less emphasis on hell and the fear of damnation as a method of conversion. Hilton has drawn a chronological distinction between these trends, arguing that the more strident form of Evangelicalism was rapidly fading from prominence by the later nineteenth century, being superseded by milder more incarnationalist views.<sup>23</sup> There is, however, significant evidence of a hardening of convictions among many Evangelicals during this same period, which has been described as the development of 'proto-fundamentalism'.<sup>24</sup>

T. R. Birks's theological output provides an excellent vantage point from which to consider such differing interpretations of the development of Evangelical thought. Birks's early career was strongly influenced by Edward Irving and his new school of Evangelicals. During the 1840s he largely concentrated his attention on prophetic studies and his interpretation of prophetic Scripture underpinned his strident anti-Catholic polemic. Yet he was also developing, during this same period, eschatological views that reflect the milder, incarnationalist, aspect of Romanticism. Unlike most of his adventist contemporaries who were increasingly being drawn towards a doctrine of the literal, and infallible, verbal inspiration of Scripture, Birks

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<sup>23</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), p. 366.

<sup>24</sup>Rennie, I. S., 'Fundamentalism and the Varieties of North Atlantic Evangelicalism', in Bebbington, D. W., Noll, M. A., and Rawlyk, G. A. (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York, 1994), pp. 343-347.

mounted a rationalistic defence of the more conventional doctrine of plenary inspiration.

#### Birks's education, intellectual influences and early career

Thomas Rawson Birks was born, on 28 September 1810, into a Baptist family at Staveley in Derbyshire. His father was a tenant farmer under the Duke of Devonshire<sup>25</sup> and Birks initially attended the local village school before boarding at Chesterfield. At sixteen he entered the Dissenting College at Mill Hill, where he soon progressed to serve as an assistant master.

Birks's mathematical prowess led some friends of his family to propose a university education. The proposal was taken up by Thomas Hill (1788-1875), a former scholar of Trinity College Cambridge and vicar of Chesterfield (1822-1846),<sup>26</sup> who also gave him preparatory classical tuition.<sup>27</sup> The choice of an Anglican tutor may have been primarily because of Hill's connection with Trinity. Nonetheless, Birks's family, though they worshipped at an Independent chapel in Chesterfield, do not seem to have held narrowly denominationalist views. Birks had attended, with his sisters, a meeting of the local auxiliary of the pan-evangelical Bible Society, which had been chaired by Hill.<sup>28</sup>

Financial provision was made, by a relative Miss Rawson, for Birks to begin his studies at Trinity. He entered the college in October 1830 as a sizar

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<sup>25</sup>The family home contained a library of 300 volumes ('In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883) and a maidservant and children's nurse were also employed in the household (affidavit, 13 October 1830; Birks family papers).

<sup>26</sup>Hill was subsequently appointed Archdeacon of Derby (1847-1873); Pollard, A., 'Hill, Thomas' in D. M. Lewis (ed.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford, 1995), p. 554, 'Death of the Rev. Thomas Hill, D. D.', *Derbyshire Times*, 18 September 1875.

<sup>27</sup>Hill later recalled that, 'Having satisfied myself that his [Birks's] talents were of a very high order, & that his piety ensured the right application of those talents, I was instrumental, about 8 or 9 years ago, in procuring his admission as a Sizar, in Trinity College'; T. Hill, Letter to Duke of Devonshire, 6 October 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3761.

<sup>28</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. H. Fletcher, 2 August 1823, Birks family papers.



under its senior tutor, the mathematician and philosopher of science William Whewell.<sup>29</sup> Birks graduated in January 1834 second wrangler and second Smith's prizeman and became a college tutor.<sup>30</sup> He also took on private pupils, including the son of the Earl of Aberdeen.<sup>31</sup>

Birks was 'one of the later Simeonites',<sup>32</sup> or followers of the Rev. Charles Simeon, the Evangelical vicar of Holy Trinity Church Cambridge (1783-1836). He was listed as one of the undergraduate helpers at the famous Jesus Lane Sunday School, which had recently been founded by five student members of Holy Trinity (1827).<sup>33</sup> Birks described his devotional and studious lifestyle in a letter to his mother;

I rise at 7, walk to chapel and back + breakfast, + have abt. 2 hrs reading, walk to lectures at 9 + return at 11, but seldom settle to reading till 1/2 past at least. Then I read till 2 or 2 1/2, + walk out till 4. Five, I rest or walk half an hour after dinner, read an hour till 6, walk to chapel + return + read abt. two hours from 7 to 9. I am always in bed at 1/2 past 10 + generally at 10'.<sup>34</sup>

Simeon's moderate Calvinism<sup>35</sup> would also have appealed to Birks. He later recalled that he had been 'a moderate Calvinist, by early training and

<sup>29</sup>Sizars were charged minimal college fees. Birks went on to win a Foundation Scholarship, which entitled him to attend at the expense of the college; Venn, J. and J. A., *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge, 1922-1954), Part 2, Vol. I, p. 272.

<sup>30</sup>Candidates who obtained First Class honours in the Mathematical Tripos were called 'Wranglers' and ranked in order of merit. Birks's contemporaries at Trinity had expected him to have become Senior Wrangler and attributed the disappointing result to Birks's preoccupation with Scriptural study: entries from Romilly's *Cambridge Diary, 1832 - 1842* in the modern edition edited by J. P. T. Bury (Cambridge, 1967) for 21 September 1833 and 17 January 1834 on p. 38 and p. 45 and 'In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

<sup>31</sup>Rawson, H., Letter to T. R. Birks, 12 May 1834, Birks family papers. Birks had been recommended to the Earl of Aberdeen 'by Mr. Elliott of Brighton' and taught the Earl's son during his first year at Cambridge before, as he was felt to be 'more deficient in his Classical requirements than in mathematics', he received further instruction from Christopher Wordsworth; Earl of Aberdeen, Letter to Duke of Devonshire, 25 October 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3788.

<sup>32</sup>Moule, H. C. G., *The Evangelical School in the Church of England* (London, 1901), p. 16.

<sup>33</sup>Hylson-Smith, K., *Evangelicals in the Church of England* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 193.

<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to S. Birks, 19 May 1831, Birks family papers.

<sup>35</sup>Barclay, O. R., *Charles Simeon and the Evangelical Tradition* (Lewes, 1986), pp. 11-12.

association' and subsequently never 'ceased to be, like most of the Evangelical clergy, moderately Calvinistic, or, to speak more correctly, temperately Augustinian' in his 'views of theology'.<sup>36</sup>

Trinity College was, during Birks's time as an undergraduate and then Fellow of the institution (1834-1844), a main centre for the diffusion of continental Romanticism.<sup>37</sup> Whewell was one of the few contemporary Englishmen to have read the works of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in the original and his *Philosophy of Discovery* reflected the influence of Romantic idealism. It rejected the mechanistic empiricism of Enlightenment science and aimed to demonstrate what the activity of mind contributed to scientific activity. Induction, Whewell argued, was not a rational process - it involved imaginative guess-work.<sup>38</sup>

Birks similarly argued, in his Trinity Prize Essay (1834), that knowledge of both science and ethics was intuitive. The basis of mathematical science was the consciousness of the existence of an outward material world, just as ethics was based upon an 'inward consciousness' of Will, our fixed sense of 'responsible being, which at once proclaims the soul a denizen of the world of spirits' and was also an 'intuitive certainty'.<sup>39</sup> Like Coleridge, Birks believed that the laws of morality were as demonstrable as those of geometry.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870), p. 11. The 'study of prophecy' and 'wider meditation on Scripture' in subsequent years 'varied, widened, and deepened' Birks's 'creed', leading him to conclude that 'general, no less than special grace, enters widely and amply into God's moral government and the final results of Redemption'; *Ibid.*, p. 11, see chapters 3 and 9.

<sup>37</sup>Preyer, R. O., 'The Romantic Tide Reaches Trinity: Notes on the Transmission of New Approaches to Traditional Studies at Cambridge, 1820-1840', in Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.) *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981), pp. 39-68.

<sup>38</sup>Ruse, M., 'William Whewell: Omniscientist', in Fisch, M. and Schaffer, S., (eds.), *William Whewell, A Composite Portrait* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 91-92.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Analogy of Mathematical and Moral Certainty* (1834, reprinted in *First Principles of Moral Science*, London, 1873), p. 304.

<sup>40</sup>This text is discussed in detail in chapter 6.

Birks, together with his eldest sister Sarah, had joined the Church of England in the year of his entrance at Trinity, motivated by 'certain lines of speculation and conviction on general religious principles' - he had been powerfully influenced, in particular, by Irving's *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God* (1826) which had shaken 'his prejudices and opinions in the matter of an established Church'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Birks appears to have been influenced by Irvingite ideas while still at school. He had won first prize in a school competition, in 1827, for an essay on 'The Present Condition of the Jews considered as the Fulfilment of Prophecy'.<sup>42</sup>

Irving's exposition of Scriptural prophecies was based upon his conviction that the thirty years since the French Revolution had witnessed the wrath of the Lord against the kings of the earth. During this period of upheaval and conflict, the first six vials of divine judgement had been meted out within the limits of the ten Papal kingdoms, while Britain, as the only one of the ten nations not under Papal sway, was to be identified as the sealed nation described in the Book of Revelation.<sup>43</sup> Britain had been spared and blessed because of the historic resistance of the established churches of England and Scotland to Roman Catholicism and the future of the nation depended upon the continuing 'magisterial acknowledgement of the orthodox and true church'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>41</sup>'In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883. Writing in 1870, Birks stated that when he joined the Anglican church 'forty years ago, the change of judgement referred wholly to the laws of national duty'; Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870), p. 11. Bishop Jacobson of Chester had also attended Mill Hill School in the 1820s and subsequently joined the Church of England while at Oxford and Robert Gandell, who became Laudian Professor of Arabic and Canon of Wells, was another Mill Hillian convert to Anglicanism: Brett-James, N. G., *Mill Hill* (Glasgow, 1938), p. 69.

<sup>42</sup>Brett-James, N. G., *The History of Mill Hill School* (London, 1908), p. 91. Irving's popularity was at its height at this time, with the Regent Square Church being erected in 1827 to accommodate the crowds wishing to hear him preach.

<sup>43</sup>Irving, E., *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these latter times, and until the second advent* (second edition, Glasgow, 1828), p. 512.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 537.

role of the Church in national life was also subsequently interpreted by Birks in terms of its centrality in the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy.<sup>45</sup>

In February 1836, soon after the death of his mother, Birks made his first visit to the home of the respected Evangelical leader and former secretary of the Church Missionary Society Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850) at Watton in Hertfordshire, taking up an invitation made more than a year earlier during a brief meeting at Cambridge. Birks found there 'deep and loving sympathy' for his recent affliction and what had been intended as a short visit became a prolonged stay.<sup>46</sup>

Birks may also have been drawn to Bickersteth because of his adventist beliefs. Bickersteth had, several years earlier, ceased to believe in the progressive postmillennial eschatology that had stimulated much of the Evangelical missionary enterprise and had become a strong advocate of the premillennial advent, although he eschewed the fatalism of the Irvingites and remained actively committed to missionary causes.<sup>47</sup> A family friend had encouraged Birks by suggesting that as well as finding 'Spiritual Comfort & Strength' from the influence of Bickersteth, Birks himself 'might also be an instrument in the Lord's hands to lead him on, in points with which he has more recently come in Contact'.<sup>48</sup>

Birks subsequently settled at Watton, initially serving as a family tutor.

The Bickersteth household provided a 'season + place of retirement + rest, when

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<sup>45</sup>see chapters 4 and 8.

<sup>46</sup>Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (third edition, London, 1852), II, p. 94.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38-42. The influence of postmillennial eschatology upon missionary motivation is discussed in Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 61-3.

<sup>48</sup>Smith, O. B., Letter to T. R. Birks, 12 February 1836, Birks family papers. Birks was 'entirely engaged in speculations on the Millennium' according to Lord Aberdeen, a subject 'with which Mr. Bickersteth is also much occupied'; Duke of Devonshire, Letter to T. Hill, 21 October 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3766.

most needed'<sup>49</sup> where Birks appears to have continued to struggle to come to terms with the recent bereavements in his family.<sup>50</sup> He felt 'still very much as a spring shut up + as a fountain sealed' and wrote to his uncle that

if you are living much in the outside world of baseness + politics, my ties and communion with it are much loosened + I know not whether I can follow you. If however you are seeking to grow in the knowledge of Xt., + hungering after the truth of his word, I can a little sympathize with you, for that hunger God has given me, though I feel to have little beside - like a large vessel, but more than half empty, + needing first to be filled, ere it can overflow. God has given me now a high calling, but I have little strength or wisdom to discharge it aright, + certainly little disposition to spend many of my thoughts on things that perish in the using.<sup>51</sup>

Birks took orders in 1837 following the 'sudden removal of Mr. Bickersteth's curate' and, he recalled, 'to succeed him was the express cause of my ordination'.<sup>52</sup> Later that same year he declined to accept the position of minister to the family and household of the Duke of Devonshire,<sup>53</sup> feeling that he lacked experience and 'freedom' from 'inward trial + distraction of mind'.<sup>54</sup> He continued to serve as Bickersteth's curate and was ordained priest in 1841.<sup>55</sup> Birks's academic record and early publications on prophecy, defending the Protestant interpretation of the Apocalypse, brought him the offer of the living of the nearby parish of Kelshall in 1844.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. H. Fletcher, 12 July 1837, Birks family papers.

<sup>50</sup>Birks's sisters, Sarah and Anna, had died in 1830 and 1832; his mother died in 1836 and his father in 1837.

<sup>51</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. H. Fletcher, 12 July 1837, Birks family papers.

<sup>52</sup>T. R. Birks, Letter to Duke of Devonshire, 20 December 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3788.1. Birks had been ordained deacon on 3 December 1837; Certificate of ordination of T. R. Birks as deacon, 3 December 1837, Birks family papers.

<sup>53</sup>T. Hill, Letter to Duke of Devonshire, 28 September 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3756.

<sup>54</sup>T. R. Birks, Letter to Duke of Devonshire, 20 December 1837, Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth, 3788.1.

<sup>55</sup>Certificate of ordination of T. R. Birks as priest, 28 November 1841, Birks family papers.

<sup>56</sup>The living was offered by its patron the Bishop of Ely (Dr. Allen); 'Professor Birks', *The Cambridge Review*, 17 October 1883. The living was valued at £548, with a recorded population of 251; *Churchman's Monthly Review* (1844).

Birks married Bickersteth's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, in the following year.<sup>57</sup> They had eight children, two of whom died in early infancy. Their eldest child, Sarah Frances, died aged 16.<sup>58</sup> Three sons and two daughters survived them.<sup>59</sup>

Birks spent two decades as rector of Kelshall and, in addition to his parish activities, was a committed member of Evangelical societies, often travelling to preach on behalf of missionary and anti-Roman Catholic organizations.<sup>60</sup> He was a founder member of the Evangelical Alliance and took up the post of honorary secretary of the Alliance when it was offered to him following the death of his father-in-law in 1850. He was also a leading member of the Prophecy Investigation Society and published a large number of works of prophetic interpretation during this period.

Birks's other publications of the 1840s and 1850s show the diversity of his intellectual interests. He engaged with contemporary political debates and also addressed the religious implications of new developments in both science and Biblical criticism. He also won the Seatonian prize, a Cambridge University competition for devotional poetry, in successive years, 1843 and 1844.

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<sup>57</sup>The Birks family papers contain a number of letters written by Elizabeth to her sisters Frances and Charlotte. These mainly discuss the health of the family at Kelshall and Watton (Frances was an invalid), family excursions and minor domestic details.

<sup>58</sup>Sarah Birks died in 1863; Aglionby, F. K., *The Life of Edward Henry Bickersteth, bishop and poet* (London, 1907), p. 25.

<sup>59</sup>Edward Bickersteth Birks (1849-1926) and Herbert Alfred Birks (1856-1923) became Anglican clergymen and Arthur Rawson Birks (1850-1923) joined the Indian Civil Service; Venn, J. and J. A., *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge, 1922-1954), Part 2, Vol. I, p. 272.

<sup>60</sup>In 1848, for example, Birks was invited to preach on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews at Bristol (Birks, E. S., Letter to F. Bickersteth, 8 July 1848, Birks family papers). Later in the same year he attended the jubilee celebrations of the Church Missionary Society (Bickersteth, C., *Doing and Suffering. Memorials of Elizabeth and Frances, daughters of the late Rev. Edward Bickersteth, by their sister* (London, 1860), p. 106). Birks also preached before the Bristol auxiliary of the Protestant Alliance in the aftermath of the 'Papal Aggression' crisis (Birks, T. R., *Modern Popery: its strength, and its weakness, as an aggressive power* (Bristol, 1852)).

Birks's church career began at what has generally been interpreted as a time of severe crisis in both the established church and the Evangelical movement. The crisis in contemporary Evangelicalism has been partly regarded as generational, with several of the leading lights of the movement including Simeon, Rowland Hill, and William Wilberforce having died by the end of the 1830s, and partly as a reaction to the perceived threat from a revived Roman Catholicism and political radicalism. The establishment felt itself undermined both by state intervention in ecclesiastical affairs, with the introduction of the Irish Church Temporalities Act (1833), and wider constitutional reform, as well as the rise to prominence of an increasingly well organized and militant Dissenting body and by Chartist unrest.

The social tensions of the 1830s and 1840s spurred stronger denominational and political allegiances, as well as stimulating more doctrinaire religious views. Evangelicalism became increasingly negative and strident and its changing character during this period has usually been considered to have been a reaction against contemporary developments and as a turning away from social involvement towards a narrower, essentially sectarian, outlook. Bebbington's account, however, emphasizes the role of 'high' cultural influences in shaping the reactions of Evangelicals to such challenges. He maintains that educated Evangelicals like Birks, imbued with Romantic sensibilities, had assimilated the adventism of the Irvingites into an ideological framework that made it imperative for them to denounce Catholicism and Liberalism.<sup>61</sup>

The expectation of the literal personal advent of Christ was a focus for their spirituality and a prominent theme of contemporary hymns like Birks's

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<sup>61</sup>A fusion of adventist religion and patriotic sentiment, with Britain being eulogised as an elect nation having a divine mission to her empire. If the Protestant constitution was upheld then, Evangelical prophetic expositors claimed, 'Popish' nations would soon be destroyed prior to the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth (cf. Birks, T. R., *Protestant Truth the Basis of National Prosperity* (London, 1848)).

'The mighty God, the Lord hath spoken':

Oh, who can stand when Thou appearest  
In robes of majesty divine ?  
Though now each contrite sigh Thou hearest  
What terrors then will round Thee shine !<sup>62</sup>

Hilton has argued that adventism predisposed many of the Evangelicals of Birks's generation towards a preoccupation with special providences, a view of a God perpetually guiding historical events and miraculously intervening in earthly affairs.<sup>63</sup> This, he claims, distinguished the new brand of 'evangelical extremists' from the more traditional 'moderate and respectable version' of Evangelicalism which had retained a 'natural law' conception of providential action and a belief that missionary efforts would, without miraculous divine intervention, convert the world to Christianity and usher in the millennial age of spiritual blessing.

Premillennialists like Bickersteth and Birks were now inclined to regard national disasters like the cholera epidemic (1832) and Irish Famine (1847) as specific divine judgements for national sins and, in turn, these national sins were seen as ominous portents of the predicted 'last days'. Bickersteth believed, for example, that the Famine was a 'judgement ... from the hand of God', inflicted as a punishment for the prevalence of worldliness, sabbath breaking, idleness and infidelity.<sup>64</sup> Yet, as Hilton acknowledges, 'moderate' Evangelicals like Chalmers also saw the Famine as a divine punishment and Samuel Waldegrave, bishop of Carlisle, as late as the 1860s, made much of particular providences and welcomed national days of prayer to atone for national sins.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>From *Hymns of Prayer and Praise with Tunes selected by C. E. B. Young* (London, 1921).

<sup>63</sup>Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, p. 94.

<sup>64</sup>Bickersteth also made much of the fact that the potato blight had struck less than a month after the passing of the Maynooth Act (1845); Bickersteth, E., *The National Fast of 1847* (London, 1847), pp. 5-7.

<sup>65</sup>Waldegrave, S., *The Cattle Plague: A Warning to Britain from the King of Nations* (London, 1866).



Developments in providential theology do not, therefore, appear to have had the crucial determining role in Evangelical thought that Hilton has ascribed to them. Birks, as a premillennial adventist, did believe in special providences, but he also had no difficulty in reconciling this belief with an enduring personal interest in science and an acceptance of the 'constancy and unshaken firmness' of the 'laws of nature'. Providence worked through 'unchangeable and eternal' divine laws, although an awesome divine power was capable of 'suspending, reversing or altering' those laws, especially in passing judgements upon sinful nations, which had in the past included the fall of Rome and Napoleon's Moscow campaign.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, the different shades of early nineteenth-century Evangelical opinion may have been 'as much a matter of temperament as a matter of theology'.<sup>67</sup> The precise nature of the mentality of the new 'extreme' form Evangelicalism, developing in the 1830s, is particularly difficult to pin down. It was marked by a sense of pessimism as large-scale Irish immigration and the defection of prominent Anglicans like Newman to Rome (1845) seemed to indicate the irresistible advance of a confident Catholic church. Protestantism appeared to be retreating and defeated, just as the true church was predicted to suffer in the final days of present dispensation. Yet there was also a fervent optimism and confidence in the prospects of enterprises like the post-famine missions to Irish Catholics and a new enthusiasm for pan-evangelical activity that was reflected in the foundation of the Evangelical Alliance (1846).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Unbelief of Pretended Science in the Last Days', in Birks, T. R., (ed.), *Present Times and Future Prospects* (London, 1854), p. 63.

<sup>67</sup>Hempton, D. N., 'Evangelicalism and eschatology', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31, 1980, p. 191.

<sup>68</sup>Bowen, D., 'Alexander R. C. Dallas, The Warrior-Saint', in Phillips, P. T. (ed.), *The View from the Pulpit* (Toronto, 1978), pp. 17-45 and Wolffe, J. R., 'The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s: An attempt to institutionalise Christian unity', in Sheils, W. J. and Wood, D. (eds.), *Voluntary Religion, Studies in Church History* 23 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 341-3.

New Romantic sensibilities were a major influence but it is also important to recognize that they appear to have been accommodated within an older framework of enduring Enlightenment attitudes and modes of thought. Birks, along with other Evangelical clerics like E. B. Elliott and John Cumming, developed elaborate exegetical schemes relating Biblical prophecy to historical events and such attempts to discern ordered and predictable patterns of providential action in history reflect the enduring legacy of Enlightenment rationality.<sup>69</sup> Birks's prophetic interests were also combined with a moderate Calvinism which has been identified as an enduring Enlightenment influence upon Evangelicalism.<sup>70</sup>

The succeeding chapters, 3-6, will, by studying Birks's activity and publications from the 1830s to the 1850s, further analyse how Evangelical thought was influenced by trends in contemporary intellectual and cultural life. They will attempt to present a detailed examination of the way in which adventist expectations were assimilated into the Evangelical mentality and system of belief. Particular attention will also be paid to the role of theological concerns in shaping Evangelical political and social thought and to the ideological motivations underpinning anti-Catholic, missionary and pan-evangelical activities. Finally, Birks's philosophical and scientific interests will be considered in relation to their cultural and religious context.

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<sup>69</sup>Wolffe, J. R., *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-60* (Oxford, 1991), p. 30.

<sup>70</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 63-5.

### CHAPTER III

#### **Prophecy and Eschatology**

The brief spell of popularity and notoriety which surrounded the ministry of Edward Irving, in the 1820s, helped to stimulate a deeper and more wide-ranging preoccupation with the unfulfilled Biblical prophecies concerning the last days. A growing number of Evangelicals adopted the belief that the return of the Messiah would precede the conversion of the world to the Gospel and would introduce a millennial reign of righteousness and peace.

Irvingite ideas were a major formative influence upon T. R. Birks and this chapter presents an account of Birks's views on prophecy and eschatology. It aims to demonstrate that the influence of premillennial adventism had far-reaching implications for Evangelical theology and spirituality. The chapter also reflects upon the significance of Birks's output within the wider Evangelical context.

### Premillennial Adventism

The attention of the Evangelical world was initially drawn to prophetic studies in the aftermath of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The cataclysmic scale of events in France appeared to be undermining the progressive, rationalist assumptions of the Enlightenment and, as the 1790s progressed and witnessed the destruction of Papal power in France and the eventual banishment of the pontiff from Rome (1798), there was a growing belief among commentators that European events were an uncanny fulfilment of the prophecies of Daniel VII and Revelation XIII.

If the wicked fourth beast of Daniel's vision - equated with the Papacy - had now been finally brought down, it would be a clear sign that the other great events alluded to in the visions of Daniel and the Apocalypse would also come to pass and hence Biblical prophecies could provide a key to both the understanding of current events and to discovering what was destined to happen in the future. Writers on prophecy, like J. H. Frere and W. Cuninghame, also came to believe that the 'time, times and a half' (Dan. XII. 7) referred to 1260 days that were equated with the number of actual earthly years allotted to the Papal supremacy over the saints, 1260 years that ended in 1792-3.<sup>2</sup>

This apparently clear correlation between prophecy and Papal history thus 'provided biblical commentators with a prophetic Rosetta stone', an interpretative framework for human history and contemporary events.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the pervading atmosphere of crisis at home and abroad ensured that Evangelical

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<sup>1</sup>Nelson, R. R., 'Apocalyptic Speculation and the French Revolution', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 53, 1981, pp. 194-206.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver, W. H., *Prophets and Millennialists. The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Sandeen, E. R., *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago, 1970), p. 7.

authors continued to search for further 'signs of the times' that could be convincingly related to Scriptural references and the 'succession of political and military events which they seemed to make intelligible gave their eschatological views a semblance of actuality, thus engendering in the public the belief that what was happening before their eyes was the very apocalyptic sequence of events that had been predicted in the Prophecies of the Latter Days'.<sup>4</sup>

The renewed interest in prophecy was also associated with the Jewish question and organized Evangelical missions aimed at the Jews blossomed at around the same time as the growth of scholarly interest in prophetic subjects. The Jews had once been God's chosen people and their fate was of particular importance for this reason. Moreover, what had befallen them since the period of the Second Temple and during the Dispersion was taken as conclusive evidence of prophecy and its literal interpretation - the prophets had proved to have been absolutely right in predicting the Babylonian captivity and the return to Palestine, the second destruction of Jerusalem and the Dispersion.<sup>5</sup> W. R. Fremantle, minister of West Street Episcopal Church, claimed that the Dispersion was a 'living comment upon fulfilled prophecy'.<sup>6</sup>

Hence the unfulfilled prophecies concerning the future fate of the Jewish people seemed all the more compelling, especially as the prophetic text that foresaw the restoration of the Jews to their own land (Isa. XI-XII) also described the events apparently already fulfilled in the French Revolution and, through the fulfilment of these prophecies, the second advent, Kingdom of the risen saints and the longed for millennium would come to pass. T. S. Grimshawe, rector of

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<sup>4</sup>Vreté, M., 'The Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought, 1790-1840', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 8, Jan. 1972, no. 1, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Fremantle, W. R., 'The present Dispersion a moral warning to the Gentiles, a literal fulfilment of prophecy, and a sure pledge of their future return', in Fremantle, W. R. (ed.), *Israel Restored* (London, 1841), p. 242.

Biddenham, maintained that the recent growth of missions to the Jews, together with the character of the times, fulfilled the predicted 'great conflict' between 'religion and infidelity, social order and democratic and revolutionary spirit'.<sup>7</sup> Evangelical interest in the Jewish question was, therefore, 'not mere curiosity concerning an obscure chapter in the fortunes of a nation, but rather a craving for confirmation of prophecy truth, of the validity of a Christian conception of history, as well as a warrant of the eschatological expectations and the long yearning after redemption'.<sup>8</sup>

*Lewis Way, a leading figure in the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews*, had been inspired by prophecies concerning the restoration of the Jews prior to the advent, which he came to believe was near at hand.<sup>9</sup> Way influenced Henry Drummond, a banker, associate of Irving and Vice-President of the Jews' Society from 1823, who set about exploring prophetic subjects in depth, holding an annual series of prophetic conferences at his Surrey country estate at Albury Park, from 1826-30.

The Albury participants concluded that if the return of Christ was to be associated with return of the Jews, then the millennium could only be located after the second coming and the Christian dispensation, like the Jewish, would be terminated suddenly in divine judgements. The Jews would be restored to their own land during these final judgements.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Frere and Cuninghame, who had regarded the second advent as metaphorical - representing some great manifestation of the Spirit - the Albury group believed that it would be a literal personal return of Christ in glory.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Grimshawe, T. S., 'Importance of the Subject', in Fremantle, W. R. (ed.), *Israel Restored*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>8</sup>Vreté, M., 'The Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought, 1790-1840', p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Appendix I

### Comparison with other millenarian movements

It is difficult to determine whether this atmosphere of anxious premillennial expectation was essentially a theological product of the contemporary political and social situation, or whether new adventist beliefs predisposed Evangelicals to interpret events in prophetic terms. Edward Bickersteth, for instance, does appear to have been deeply shaken by recent social turmoil, which had shattered his conviction that the power of the gospel would convert the world to Christianity - the disturbing implications of Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the Bristol riots directed his mind increasingly towards the second advent and he began, from 1833, to hold annual gatherings at Watton devoted to the study of prophecy.<sup>12</sup>

Bebbington, however, has pointed to certain important characteristics distinguishing early nineteenth-century millennialism from previous millenarian movements, which have often been historically explained as direct products of social unrest. In particular, he has argued, it was initially a movement restricted to the educated classes and it was more adventist than millenarian. Nineteenth-century adventists largely ignored the predicted status reversal of the millennium, when the greatest was to be subject to the humblest believer, and were far more concerned with the literal personal return of Christ in the flesh - the new Romantic spirituality could look forward to the sudden appearance of 'a divine figure' in the 'midst of the affairs of nations'.<sup>13</sup>

There was a new fascination with the portentous images contained in Scriptural prophecy and the Book of Revelation. There was, according to Birks, a desire to find 'the deep harmony' within Scripture, the 'secret links which unite

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<sup>12</sup>Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (London, 1852), vol. II, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 84.

its earliest and last revelations'.<sup>14</sup> Birks attacked the symbolic tradition of prophetic interpretation as a 'verbal spirit which has overrun the Protestant Church, from studying the Bible as a *book*, instead of viewing it as a *record*, and transporting ourselves in spirit into the scenes it sets before us'.<sup>15</sup> Even some of the most prominent prophetic scholars, like Frere, had, Birks believed, been too ready to regard Scriptural prophets as writers who had consciously used symbolic imagery in their accounts, which had to be interpreted in relation to the subjective purposes of those writers. Whereas if readers entered fully 'into the spirit of the record', those symbols could usually be found to form emblems in visions seen by the writers, which had to be interpreted objectively as parts of the whole series of visions.<sup>16</sup>

#### Anglican Premillennialism

Despite the declining credibility, by the mid-1830s, of Irving and the Albury school, premillennial adventism continued to become increasingly influential among Anglican Evangelical clergy. There was a further revival of adventist expectations around 1840, with Bickersteth apparently being a pivotal figure linking the generations of Anglican adventists, giving a new respectability to prophetic studies after the Irving debacle<sup>17</sup> and converting Shaftesbury to premillennialism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', in Bickersteth, E. (ed.), *The Second Coming, the Judgement, and Kingdom of Christ* (London, 1843), p. 249.

<sup>15</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Archdeacon Hill, printed in *The Investigator, or Monthly Expositor of Prophecy* (1833).

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth*, vol. II, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>Sandeen dates the first phase of the millenarian revival from the French Revolution to Irving's fall from grace in the early 1830s, with the second phase beginning in the 1840s, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 - 41. Literature on the Jewish question also reached its peak in the early 1840s (Vreté, *op. cit.*, p. 42).



A critic of premillennialism, James Grant, the Evangelical editor of the *Morning Advertiser*, estimated that more than half the Evangelical clergy of the Church of England had adopted these views by the 1860s.<sup>19</sup> Their activities were focused on the Prophecy Investigation Society. This organization appears to have been founded by one of the first generation of Anglican prophetic scholars, J. H. Frere, who, with Irving's approval, formed a small study group with like-minded ministers in 1826.<sup>20</sup> The society later began to promote premillennialism more publicly through twice-yearly meetings, in April and November, and it held an annual series of lectures on questions of prophetic interpretation at St. Giles's Church, Bloomsbury, beginning in 1841. According to Grant, the society had, by the 1860s, fifty members, predominantly clergymen from the Church of England.<sup>21</sup>

Birks was a leading figure among this second generation of Anglican premillennialists.<sup>22</sup> His period of residence in the Bickersteth household at Watton was a time of retirement from Cambridge life, 'not unconnected with the

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<sup>19</sup>Grant, J., 'Preface' to *The End of All Things; or, The Coming and Kingdom of Christ* (London, 1866).

<sup>20</sup>From, L. E., *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, (Washington, 1946-54) vol. III, pp. 498-499.

<sup>21</sup>Grant comments that 'The clerical members of this society are, in the great majority of cases, men of eminence in the religious world; while the laymen are, in every instance, men of acknowledged piety and a high social position', *op. cit.*, pp. 114 - 5.

<sup>22</sup>The other leading Anglican prophetic scholar was E. B. Elliott (1793-1875) who, although a contemporary of the first generation of prophetic writers, came to prominence with his detailed exposition of Revelation, *Horae Apocalypticæ* (1844), which went into five editions in eighteen years, and his work reached an even wider audience through John Cumming's popular lectures. Birks commented on the 'high and deserved reputation' of Elliott's work, suggesting that no previous commentary on the Apocalypse had 'brought such various materials to bear on the historical explanation of the visions; and none, perhaps, has left the impression of its substantial truth, or even of its minute accuracy, on a wider circle of readers' (Birks, T. R., 'Preface' to *The Mystery of Providence: or, the Prophetic history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire: a historical exposition of Rev. VIII. IX* (London, 1848)). Birks did, however, hold a different view of the structure of the Apocalypse, particularly the order and application of the Trumpet vision. In the fifth edition of the *Horae* Elliott claimed that Birks, who he described as the 'ablest and most eminent advocate of an historical exposition', had abandoned his position and now agreed with his own (Elliott, E. B., *Horae Apocalypticæ* (fifth edition, 1862), vol. I, p. 611). Birks responded by affirming that he still adhered to the view of the prophecy he had first expounded in 1833; Birks, T. R., *Thoughts on the Times and Seasons of Sacred Prophecy* (London, 1880), p. 9.

anxious demands of intense thought upon some of the deepest problems of religion'. He devoted much of his time there to the study of prophecy, taking a strongly affirmative position in debates over the premillennial advent.<sup>23</sup>

Birks defended the literal interpretation of prophecy on the 'clear and logical grounds of Scripture evidence and solid reason', believing that it was an 'integral and essential part of divine revelation'.<sup>24</sup> He contended that the seemingly complete and precise fulfilment of prophecy in recent European history from the French Revolution encouraged the quest to find literal fulfilments for every other prophecy.

Birks believed that figurative or spiritual explanations of Biblical prophecy denigrated the authority of Scripture. He maintained that the 'most impressive' evidence for a literalist approach was 'the literal fulfilment of so many' Old Testament prophecies in the person of Jesus Christ during most of the solemn and significant scenes of his earthly life such as the Last Supper and Crucifixion. Hence the Biblical record itself provided a 'solemn assurance that all prophecies will be eventually fulfilled'.<sup>25</sup>

Birks became closely involved with the Prophecy Investigation Society and regularly contributed to its series of annual Bloomsbury lectures.<sup>26</sup> The Prophecy Investigation Society favoured what had become known as the historicist approach to prophetic interpretation. This was based upon a literal reading of prophetic imagery in which the books of Revelation and Daniel were regarded as narratives describing actual past and future events.<sup>27</sup> Historicist

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<sup>23</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

<sup>24</sup>Birks, T. R., *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy: including an examination of several recent expositions and of the Year-Day theory* (London, 1843), p. 432.

<sup>25</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Lecture on the Principles of Prophetic Interpretation', in Fremantle, W. R. (ed.), *Israel Restored* (London, 1841), p. 67.

<sup>26</sup>Grant quotes from a list of committee members of the society elected for the year 1863-4 as including Birks, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup>A small number of Anglican Evangelicals followed futurism, maintaining that Scriptural prophecy referred

scholars sought to reveal the Antichrist of prophecy (usually the Papacy) and demonstrate their conviction of its predestined final destruction, which would mark the onset of Christ's kingdom at his second advent, the event that was to be the climax of the mystery of Divine Providence.<sup>28</sup>

Birks vigorously defended the historicist position against the attacks made upon it by Darbyite futurists like James Kelly, minister of Charlotte Chapel, Pimlico. Kelly had argued that the prophecies of the Old Testament were solely related to Israel and that Revelation thus referred only to events accompanying the advent of Christ and the crisis of Israel's restoration.<sup>29</sup> Birks contended that, since the days of St. John, the Jews were no longer the people of the covenant, as this privilege had been transferred to the visible Church among the Gentiles. Hence, Birks claimed, the 'very same principle, which made all Old Testament prophecy, from Moses to Malachi, centre in the Jewish nation, *requires* that all New Testament prophecy should centre, not round the Jewish nation, but around the Gentile Church, the actual people of God's covenant, who have been ingrafted in their stead'.<sup>30</sup>

Birks's *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (1843) was one of the most extensive defences of the historicist position. It took the form of a meticulous refutation of futurism, based upon a defence of the 'year-day' principle used to explain prophetic time periods.

Birks emphasized the parallels between the Apocalypse and the Book of Daniel and the common 1260 day/year chronology they shared.<sup>31</sup> He went on systematically to discuss the specific periods of time mentioned in individual

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exclusively to post-millennial events, but this approach was mainly adopted by High Anglicans.

<sup>28</sup>Elliott, E. B., *Horae Apocalypticae* (fifth edition, 1862), vol. II, pp. 145-7 and cf. Appendix I.

<sup>29</sup>Sandeen, E. R., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The General Scope of the Apocalypse', *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, 1, 1849, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup>Birks, T. R., *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London, 1843), pp. 8-13.

prophecies in order to demonstrate that a 'day' was always equivalent to a literal year.<sup>32</sup>

The *Christian Observer* recognized the 'valuable' contribution of this work to recent debates, but was still unable to accept the personal premillennial advent of Christ and the literal interpretation of prophecy. It urged caution and argued that the conflicting theories concerning prophetic interpretation bore comparison with the situation in contemporary geology where no single theory could account for the known phenomena but, in the near future, this state of confusion would be synthesized into a coherent system as in Newtonian astronomy.<sup>33</sup>

Birks conceded to a correspondent that the *First Elements* had necessarily been 'too dry and controversial' to be of interest to a wide readership and he felt that his subsequent historical exposition of Daniel, *The Four Prophetic Empires* (1844) would be 'more generally useful than the last'.<sup>34</sup> This work traced the history of four imperial powers ending with the fourth empire, that of Papal Rome and, Birks claimed, 'every feature' of the prophecy 'finds its full counterpart in the constitution, decrees, and history of the Roman Popedom'.<sup>35</sup> The fourth empire, Birks believed, was soon to be destroyed as human history was approaching the time of the second advent of Christ.

### Revelation

After engaging with the futurists by tracing the historical fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, Birks increasingly turned his attention to discussion of

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>33</sup>*Christian Observer*, Jan. 1845, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to unnamed correspondent, 9 November 1843, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Department of Western Manuscripts, MS. Eng. lett. c. 783.

<sup>35</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Four Prophetic Empires, and the Kingdom of Messiah: being an exposition of the first two visions of Daniel* (London, 1844), p 259.

unfulfilled prophecy in his contributions to the Bloomsbury lectures and then in his *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy* (1854).

In Birks's scheme Revelation was seen as essentially a parallel with the gospel account of the birth, suffering and resurrection of Christ - Revelation presented the history of the appearance, reign and judgement of the 'mystic or Papal Anti-christ'.<sup>36</sup> Individual chapters of the Apocalypse foretold the fall of Rome, the French Revolution, the collapse of the Turkish Empire and, finally, the collapse of the Papal Babylon.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, he believed, prophecy and history were in an 'exact and unbroken accordance'.<sup>38</sup> The cataclysmic events of recent times - the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, together with the growth of 'Papal superstition and darkness' - marked the dawn of a new era in the world's history. Birks spoke of an 'uneasy, feverish expectation of some great, indescribable revolution' which 'fills the thoughts and escapes from the lips, even of worldly observers, in watching the history of the last fifty years'.<sup>39</sup> In such times, he declared, which have the 'character of intense and earnest preparation' for 'great changes' that are 'near at hand', Christians had to turn to the scriptures for knowledge of what was to come - the thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints following the second advent.<sup>40</sup>

Birks followed the broad outlines of Frere's analysis of the structure of the Apocalypse. Within the overall seven-fold arrangement of the Apocalyptic vision, there were, he believed, three central, and parallel, streams of vision, which Birks

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<sup>36</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Archdeacon Hill, in *The Investigator, or Monthly Expositor of Prophecy* (1833).

<sup>37</sup>See Appendix II.

<sup>38</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Mystery of Providence; or the Prophetic History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1848), p. 30.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Signs of the Lord's Coming' in Cadman, W. (ed.), *The Parables Prophetically Explained* (London, 1853), p. 241.

<sup>40</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', p. 196.

took to be reflections of 'the threefold dominion of the Three Persons of the Godhead administered by the Son of Man'.<sup>41</sup>

Firstly, the Seals (Ch. V-VII) which applied to the birth and reign of the infidel Antichrist. Secondly, the Trumpets (Ch. VIII-X) of divine judgement announcing his approaching fall. Thirdly, the Bride (Ch. XII - XIV) or history of the Church. Then came the Vials of Wrath and the three explanatory visions.<sup>42</sup>

Birks believed that the seven vials had begun to be poured out with the beginning of the French Revolution and that the course of Providence was

now near its close under the seventh vial ... when, after the overthrow of the Papal Babylon, like paganism of old, we are to be led, as I judge, through sword and famine and pestilence to that short hour of great tribulation, from which the Son of Man Himself shall deliver us.<sup>43</sup>

Yet Birks, unlike some commentators, was reluctant to speculate about the immediate outcome of prophecies yet to be fulfilled or to predict the chronology of future events.<sup>44</sup> He nonetheless accepted that, in order to ascertain the 'prophetic features' of current events, 'even conjectures, offered with caution and humility, on the year when revealed numbers may expire' were 'justified by the examples of Scripture, and encouraged and commended by the Spirit of God'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Archdeacon Hill; see Appendix II.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Birks's generation had the salutary lesson that a number of the earlier Anglican expositors, including Daniel Wilson and Thomas White, had predicted 1843-4 as the advent date (Froom, L. E., *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, (Washington, 1946-54) vol. III, pp. 500-1). Evangelical commentators were not, however, easily daunted when such predictions proved inaccurate; Vreté has observed that errors were attributed to 'someone or other having misinterpreted the course of current world events - not so much, indeed, their nature or import as rather their extent. What mattered above all was the sure awareness that their generation was the last of this world or ... rather the first of the Last Days' (*op. cit.*, p. 31).

<sup>45</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Right Knowledge of Times and Seasons' in Birks, T. R. (ed.), *The Hope of the Apostolic Church* (London, 1845), p. 227.

He also confidently believed that his generation would 'not pass away', or would 'barely pass away', before 'great and wonderful changes' would be fulfilled.<sup>46</sup>

### The Advent and the Millennium

Birks's arguments were criticized by the Scottish Free Church minister David Brown in his popular restatement of the postmillennial scheme *Christ's Second Coming: Will it be Premillennial ?* (1846).<sup>47</sup> Brown produced a general critique of the premillennial scheme, citing the works of its leading exponents. He regarded Birks as 'one of the acutest and most forcible writers on that side' of the question.<sup>48</sup>

Brown had questioned Birks's assertion that the vision of Revelation XIX, 10 constituted a distinct and detailed narrative of the second advent, which was to occur just prior to the millennium and to introduce it. Birks believed that the evidence of this 'fundamental vision' was 'decisive and complete'.<sup>49</sup>

Brown drew 'the opposite inference from Mr. Birks' - the narrative details and character of the passage convinced him that it was '*not* the second advent'. It could not be read as a detailed descriptive announcement of Christ's coming and, according to Brown, the only fact that could be definitely ascertained from this text was that Christ would return.<sup>50</sup>

Birks contended that there was no Scriptural evidence for any fixed period of delay before the coming of Christ. The text revealed 'only the growth of corruptions, then already begun, until the evil in its ripeness should be met by Divine judgement on the abusers of grace; when the open punishment of those

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>47</sup>Brown had been Irving's assistant from 1828-30 and had produced what was generally regarded as one of the most sophisticated attacks on the premillennial position.

<sup>48</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming: will it be pre-millennial ?* (second edition, Edinburgh, 1849), p. 88.

<sup>49</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Four Prophetic Empires* (London, 1844), pp. 329-330.

<sup>50</sup>Brown, D., *op. cit.*, p. 475.

who have rejected and despised the mercy of God will be attended with the fulfilment of every promise to his waiting people'.<sup>51</sup>

The testimony of the Epistles,<sup>52</sup> Birks argued, also linked 'inseparably' the end of the Antichristian apostasy and the return of the Lord, with 'no allusion in them to a Millennium as a hope of the Church before the Advent'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Lord had always been linked in Scriptural texts. The symbolism of the parable of the wheat and tares was representative of this sequence and gave additional authority to the literal interpretation of the visions of *Revelation*. *It symbolised the fact that unbelief would 'prevail within the visible church side by side with true faith and holiness ... until the Lord shall come; who will separate the hypocrites from the true believers, and assign to one class, their punishment, to the other, their eternal reward'*.<sup>54</sup>

#### The Resurrection and Judgement

Birks believed in a miraculous physical resurrection of the earthly bodies of the dead, a doctrine that had been given renewed emphasis by the literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation popularized by Edward Irving. Birks contended that the vision of Revelation XX, 6 described a 'real and personal resurrection'.<sup>55</sup> This was the plain and natural meaning of the text and it also harmonized with the rest of Scripture - in particular, the promises given to

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<sup>51</sup>Birks, T. R., *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy, being an inquiry into the Scripture testimony respecting the "good things to come"* (London, 1854), p. 74.

<sup>52</sup>Thess. II, 1-2, Cor. I.

<sup>53</sup>Birks, T. R., *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy* (London, 1854), p. 67.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>55</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', p. 200.



servants of Christ (Is. XXXII, 1) and by Christ to His Apostles when describing the kingdom as 'a royal dominion to be given to the people of Christ'.<sup>56</sup>

Birks defended his views against a correspondent who believed that modern science rendered a corporeal resurrection inconceivable and impossible. He compared objections to a bodily resurrection to Newman's evasion of the plain and natural meaning of the words the Thirty-nine Articles in *Tract XC*, arguing that his correspondent must have adopted a similar approach to numerous passages of Scripture.

Birks contended that the arguments advanced by his correspondent, such as the severe disfigurement produced by some diseases, the posthumous decomposition of corpses and the subsequent recycling of body particles in the food-chain, were 'quite irrelevant and worthless'.<sup>57</sup> This was because they all involved a fundamental misconception - that the bodies of the dead were to be raised with all their former properties and substance. This view, Birks believed, was decisively refuted by St. Paul's account stating that bodies were sown as natural bodies, but were to be raised as spiritual bodies.<sup>58</sup>

Birks also maintained that Paul's description contradicted the common view that the resurrection was to be a purely spiritual event that occurred at the instant of death. He stressed that Paul had used three terms to describe human nature - spirit, soul and body. Paul had not 'said, it is sown a body + raised a soul or spirit, but it is sown an animal body, + raised a spiritual body'.<sup>59</sup> At the second advent, the soul was to be united with a 'spiritual body', filled with 'heavenly life', the Biblical type of which was the risen Christ's appearance to

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<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>57</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to an unnamed correspondent, 26 February 1844, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Bickersteth, Box 25, Edward Bickersteth Letter Book.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.* The Biblical passage referred to is I Corinthians XV, 44.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

Thomas. The holy saints were then to reign on earth, dwelling in heaven, serving as 'ministering spirits of light' to 'sojourners on earth'.<sup>60</sup>

The final 'manifestation of God's power, + of his victory over death, + the harmony of creation + redemption', required

that human souls should be clothed with bodies, as they were created at first, + continued till sin and death, the enemies, crept in ... This God has promised, + now his Apostle's truth, as well as the full display of His omniscience, require that the body sown in the hour of death shall be fashioned into the resurrection glory.<sup>61</sup>

The doctrine of the premillennial advent required an interval of a thousand years between the resurrection of the blessed and that of the unregenerate. Birks believed this separation formed part of a central theme running throughout Scripture - the great contrast between faith and unbelief, the righteous and the wicked, and that Scriptural prophecies of the last things expressed this contrast in three ways - the resurrection of the just and unjust, the resurrection of life and to damnation, the resurrection to everlasting life and to shame and contempt.<sup>62</sup>

There was only a single specific reference (Rev. XX, 6) which appeared to tell plainly of a thousand-year interval between the resurrection of the saints and the final act of Divine judgement. Nonetheless, its language, according to Birks, was 'clear, full and unambiguous'.<sup>63</sup> It also fully harmonized the otherwise contradictory promises of the Old and New Testaments - the Old Testament told of a coming time of holiness and peace, the wider kingdom of the Messiah; the New Testament declared that the trials of the Church would not come to an end until the return of the Saviour. Only the doctrine of the first resurrection could

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<sup>60</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Resurrection to Glory', in Pym, W. W., *Good Things To Come* (London, 1847), p. 269.

<sup>61</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to unnamed correspondent, 26 February 1844.

<sup>62</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', p. 198.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 199.

'reconcile these contrasted statements' and it, therefore, 'forms a sacred key-stone in the glorious arch of Divine providence'.<sup>64</sup>

Critics of premillennialism disputed this reliance upon a single prophecy included in a problematic symbolic text. Brown maintained that this alone constituted a '*primâ facie* presumption, of the strongest nature, against the doctrine of a first resurrection, literally understood'.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, if the first resurrection was to be discarded then so must 'the pre-millennial theory itself, which absolutely depends upon it'.<sup>66</sup>

Edward Garrard Marsh, Prebendary of Southwell and Vicar of Aylesford, also believed that the passage in question had to be interpreted figuratively because it, like the whole Apocalypse was 'written in the language of symbols'.<sup>67</sup> Marsh argued that the real existence of Christ, angels and Satan did not mean that they could not have a purely symbolic purpose when they featured in a symbolic vision.<sup>68</sup> If the imagery of the white throne, seats and elders, for example, was symbolical then, Marsh declared, he 'should not scruple to say, that he, who sits upon the throne, is symbolical likewise'.<sup>69</sup> Hence, while the souls of martyrs are real, they are used in this passage to symbolise an initial triumph of godliness and Christian principles in the world.<sup>70</sup>

Birks believed, however, that the subsequent description of the resurrection to judgement following the millennium corresponded to Paul's apparently clear assertion that the just and unjust would be raised, so the first resurrection, prior to this, must also be a bodily resurrection. Equally, the

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<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>65</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming: will it be pre-millennial ?* (second edition, Edinburgh, 1849), p. 191.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>67</sup>Marsh, E. G., *Defence of an Essay on the First Resurrection, in answer to the strictures of the Rev. Thomas Rawson Birks, M. A.* (London, 1845), p. 16.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28-31.

subsequent use of the term 'second death' was clearly intended to form a contrast with the first resurrection and 'since the latter describes the final doom of the wicked, the former must equally describe the resurrection glory of the righteous'.<sup>71</sup>

Brown accepted the contrast between those who had a part in the first resurrection and those who were to be the subjects of the second death, but claimed that the first resurrection could still be interpreted as a glorious era for the church on earth.<sup>72</sup> He also believed that the premillennial interpretation of Revelation raised difficult issues concerning those individuals who were to live on earth during the millennium, as it left no provision for them to be raised or judged at all.<sup>73</sup> Still more problematic was the question of the thousand year interval separating the judgement of the elect from that of the unsaved, which was difficult to reconcile with those Scriptural passages suggesting a simultaneous judgement of all.

Premillennialists had adopted a variety of answers to this problem, some arguing that the word judge had a variety of Scriptural connotations, including the kingly exercise of power as well as retribution, others maintained that because a thousand years could be as a single day in the eyes of God, the righteous were to be judged at the start of the millennial day, the wicked at its close. Birks, however, contended that the problem could be resolved using the principle of 'sacred perspective in prophetic interpretation, where two events, which were to occur in the distant future, had seemed to the prophet to be a single episode in their vision. The more ancient prophecies were the most compressed and symbolic in describing the last judgement, while the later ones

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<sup>71</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', p. 218.

<sup>72</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming*, p. 232.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 267.

became increasingly more explicit as the end time drew nearer. Birks believed that this principle was also to be applied to the prophetic parables of Jesus, like that of the sheep and the goats (Matt XXV, 31-46), which postmillennialists had felt reinforced their view of a single judgement.

Birks had derived this method of prophetic interpretation from Irving.<sup>74</sup> He claimed that it 'may be traced from the first promise in Eden to the latest revelations of the word of God' and was intended to serve 'the great ends for which the prophecies are given to the Church'.<sup>75</sup> Hence, in the Apocalypse, the millennium occupies a much shorter space than 'the description of previous events which were nearer at hand'.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, Brown felt this line of argument was forced and could not be reconciled with the repeated direct references to both the saved and the unsaved standing before the throne of judgement and the simple message of parables like that of the separation of the tares and wheat, which seemed to be depict the judgement of the wicked at the time of the advent.<sup>77</sup>

### The Fate of the Unsaved

During the 1830s Birks suffered a profound crisis of conscience over the doctrine of the future eternal punishment of the wicked. It was later, while staying at Watton, that he began to formulate a new conception of the fate of the lost, which 'led to anxious discussions at the time'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Irving declared, 'For, as the branches of the oak are not seen in the acorn, nor the leaves of the rose in the folded bud, so are not the minute distinctions of prophetic truth made known in the germ and first beginning of revelation, but left to unfold themselves in the fulness of time, by the growth and ripening of divine purposes'; Irving, E., *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these latter times, and until the second advent* (second edition, Glasgow, 1828), p. 380.

<sup>75</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Letters on Prophecy', *Churchman*, July 1843, p. 470.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>77</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming*, p. 276.

<sup>78</sup>'In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

The subject had 'sorely, deeply and continuously exercised' his thoughts until, through close study of Biblical prophecy during the 1840s, a 'light' arose 'out of the darkness and sorrow of years of early meditation'.<sup>79</sup> The expectation of the second advent and an assuredness of imminent divine judgement had, Birks later claimed, stimulated a new awareness and interpretation of the prophesied last things.<sup>80</sup> While Birks did not publish a detailed account of his views until the 1860s,<sup>81</sup> some important aspects of this subject were discussed in his publications of the 1840s and 1850s.

Birks affirmed that those who rejected the Gospel would be condemned to an eternal punishment. He also did not deny that this punishment could involve physical suffering, but he sought to contrast the physical punishments to which sinners had been sentenced under the Law with the far more fearful, solemn and severe spiritual torment awaiting sinners against the Gospel:

The punishment under the law was sore and grievous; but how much sorer to be thrust out of the kingdom of God, to see the gates of the heavenly city for ever closed against us, and to be cast out into darkness for ever'.<sup>82</sup>

Birks's exposition of prophecy had, he believed, enabled him to move away from what he regarded as the misconceptions of the popular view of hell and towards what he understood to be a broader and more scriptural interpretation. Birks referred, for example, to Milton's depiction of Satan and his fallen angels being instantly cast down from heaven into the lowest pit of hell,

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<sup>79</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Preface' to *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (London, 1867).

<sup>80</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (London, 1867), p. 41. The 'study of prophecy, and wider meditation on Scripture' had 'widened and deepened' his 'creed'. He concluded that 'general, no less than special grace, enters widely and amply into God's moral government and the final results of Redemption' (Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870), p. 11).

<sup>81</sup>See Chapter 9.

<sup>82</sup>Birks, T. R., *Farewell Sermons. Preached in the parish church of Watton, Herts.* (London, 1883), p. 168. This collection of sermons was reprinted after Birks's death; it had originally been published under the title *Village Discourses: being ten parting sermons, preached in the Parish Church of Watton, Herts.* (London, 1846).

suggesting that 'however deep and awful the crime of the apostate angels, there is something which seems almost to grate upon the instincts of the Christian heart in the popular view of their instant and overwhelming punishment'.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, Revelation foretold three distinct stages in the overthrow of Satan - he is cast down from heaven to earth, then chained in the abyss to deceive the nations no more and then, finally, consigned to his final punishment. All these were still future events when the prophecy was made.<sup>84</sup> Hence the 'real facts of Divine Providence' show that 'instead of trembling at the spectacle of a justice awfully severe, with no trace of patience and long-suffering, we ought rather to adore a depth of forbearance towards the most aggravated and wicked abuse of mercies, that will fill the redeemed with awe and wonder through the ages of the world to come'.<sup>85</sup>

Birks also alluded to his belief, described more fully in his later publications, that the downfall of Satan was not only intended to glorify the redeemed who had been rescued by Divine grace. The lost would also see in Satan 'the Destroyer who has effected their ruin' and 'own the awful righteousness of the Supremely Good and Holy, when this Deceiver of this universe is crushed under the victorious feet of the once crucified and now exalted Son of God'.<sup>86</sup>

Birks rejected the narrow view of Christ's redemption, which made it result 'only in the salvation of a small minority of mankind, while the great majority' sank 'into eternal ruin' and the existence of the human race ceased for ever. The full glory of redemption was, he affirmed, not confined to the elect

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<sup>83</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall* (Cambridge, 1855), p. 94.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 100.

church rescued by Divine grace. It also looked forward 'to a boundless vista of triumphant love, in countless numbers of redeemed ones of mankind, who shall be the fruit of our Lord's redeeming goodness in the ages of the world to come'.<sup>87</sup>

The testimony of Scripture was that, after the close of the millennium, there would be seen 'successive generations of redeemed and holy dwellers on the new earth, after the judgement of the dead is complete'.<sup>88</sup> As Peter had predicted a 'restitution' of all things (Acts III, 21), there would be a restoration, through Christ, of the primal condition of the human race, in a state of 'perfection and uprightness upon the earth ... with a Divine command to increase and multiply, that the earth might be replenished with a race of reasonable creatures, pure holy and blessed'.<sup>89</sup> There then would be

generations of living men, who ... shall rule over all the lower universe and enjoy a happiness widening and enlarging for ever, though distinct from the peculiar glory of the risen sons of God.<sup>90</sup>

Brown felt that the concept of such post-millennial ages of salvation involved the 'very life' of the universalist system and 'the one exegetical plausibility which they are able to urge'.<sup>91</sup> Birks denied that this view opened the 'dangerous door' to universalism. It 'carefully distinguishes the Church of the first-born, complete at the coming of Christ, from those generations of the world to come' and reflected Apostolic teaching in this respect.<sup>92</sup> Birks contended that he had retained the spiritually attractive element in universalism, but, at the same time, proved the falsity of its supposed exegetical basis, maintaining that

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<sup>87</sup>Birks, T. R., *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy*, p. 354.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>91</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming: will it be pre-millennial ?* (second edition, Edinburgh, 1849), p. 175.

<sup>92</sup>Birks, T. R., *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy*, p. 356.



universalism would never 'receive its death-blow ... until this doctrine has been received'.<sup>93</sup>

Birks also felt that it helped to refute the idea of a future day of renewed probation for the heathen. The natural compassion for their fate was misplaced; Christians dwelt too much on the vast numbers to be damned, neglecting 'these glorious hopes of the world to come, with its living generations of holy worshippers'.<sup>94</sup>

### Conclusion

Birks was one of the leading Evangelical prophetic scholars. His approach to Scriptural texts involved painstaking investigation of detail, cogent argument, and a rare degree of moderation. Birks's analysis took a broader eschatological perspective than that of many contemporary commentators. In particular, his premillennialism and prophetic studies led him to criticize the way in which he considered popular Christianity had distorted the perspective of Biblical eschatology, with death usurping the place of the resurrection and vague ideas of immortality obscuring the importance of the second advent and the Kingdom.

The tone and emphasis of Birks's prophetic works reflects the Romantic longing for a return to a purer, more scriptural, faith and a related feeling that important and long hidden truths were now finally being rediscovered by prophetic scholars. Birks declared, for instance, that the 'word of God contains not only milk for babes, but a wisdom reserved for those of manly stature in Christian grace and wisdom'.<sup>95</sup> The influence of Romanticism can also be traced in Birks's literalist reading of the Apocalyptic visions regarding the first

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<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

resurrection and new Jerusalem. The sensibilities of a Romantic imagination underpinned his views on the fate of the lost and conception of a future redemption. While his published writings do not yet attempt to articulate a detailed rejection of traditional teaching on hell, they also significantly omit any discussion of a Satanic kingdom of perpetual torments for the lost.

Birks's position, during the 1840s, demonstrates that historians have underestimated the importance of the development of Evangelical thought during the earlier nineteenth century.<sup>96</sup> They have also interpreted it largely in terms of reactions to innovations made by 'liberal' thinkers, rather than seeking for change within Evangelicalism itself - in particular the vital stimulus provided by premillennial adventism. Premillennialism was, as one of its leading critics recognized, 'a school of Scripture interpretation', affecting 'some of the most commanding points of the Christian faith' and it tended to pervade 'with its own genius the entire system of one's theology, and the whole tone of his spiritual character'.<sup>97</sup>

Historicist premillennialism was the stimulus to contemporary debates concerning the doctrines of the resurrection and judgement. It underpinned Birks's views on the future life, which were feeding through into his publications of the 1840s and 1850s. For Birks, the advent hope was personally felt and served as an object of spiritual devotion. The 'near prospect' of the second advent represented a 'powerful call' to devotedness and renewed zeal. He also believed that it gave a deeper feeling of majesty and holiness to the Church's work as its labours were seen to be 'linked in close and immediate union, with all the unutterable solemnity of that great day of the Lord's appearing'. It had thus

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<sup>96</sup>See chapter 1.

<sup>97</sup>Brown, D., *Christ's Second Coming: will it be pre-millennial ?* (second edition, Edinburgh, 1849), pp. 6-7.

enlarged and ennobled Christian hopes and was an engine of divine grace to free believers from superstitious delusion.<sup>98</sup>

Yet advent hopes could often be tinged with fear, as premillennialism presupposed a 'view of the world in which judgement and demolition were the only possible response from a just God'.<sup>99</sup> Robert Buchanan, for example, warned of 'the shock of that terrible encounter', when 'the witnesses may be slain, and their dead bodies dragged about the streets of the city, ere long they shall arise and mount up to heaven, and the great cry shall be heard, "Now are the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ"'.<sup>100</sup>

Nonetheless, there was the recognition that the vision of Revelation also reflected the optimistic tone of the New Testament gospel - it was interpreted as demonstrating that God does not abandon His people to evil and that human history had become the scene of divine redemption.

Hence while Evangelicals like Birks were convinced that their sinful society was doomed to face judgement, they also strove for success in terms of awakening Christians to their peril. Their awareness of the imminence of judgement was a clear call to sinners for repentance before the day of salvation passed away.<sup>101</sup> Edward Bickersteth, for instance, compared his own missionary zeal to the recent fire on board a ship, the *Ocean Monarch*, soon after it had set out from Liverpool. Public opinion, he observed, had been focused not on the

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<sup>98</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', p. 254.

<sup>99</sup>Sandeen, E. R., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>100</sup>Buchanan, R., 'On the Causes of Schism', in Steane, E. (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (London, 1852), pp. 15-16.

<sup>101</sup>Indeed, it was believed that one of the signs announcing the end time was the preaching of the gospel to all nations. J. W. Brooks, for instance, affirmed that 'from the same period from which we date the outbreak of Anti-Christian principles, viz., the French Revolution, may be likewise dated the commencement of those gigantic *religious* efforts which are now witnessed in the earth' and 'It is, as it were, God proclaiming to us with a *loud voice* - that *judgement* is at hand - especially judgement on the Harlot Church, which is Babylon'; 'The Signs of the Second Advent, in the state of the world at large' in Bickersteth, E. (ed.), *The Second Coming, The Judgement, and the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 185.

tragic loss of many lives in the wreck, but on the bravery of the individual sailors from other vessels who had heroically risked their own lives to rescue survivors from the burning ship. He declared that 'we have a yet more important work to accomplish - to save immortal souls from a more terrific fire which will one day be kindled for the wicked, and which, when kindled, leaves no way of escape !'. It was the 'nearness of that more fearful danger and that more full joy' that ought, he believed, to rouse Christians as 'each covenanted soul is our hope, and joy, and crown of rejoicing in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming'.<sup>102</sup>

Birks similarly maintained that, for premillennialists, the 'immediate duty of Christian labour and missionary exertion continues the same. The motive in the assurance of present success, is the same also'. The practical difference between them and other Christians was that they believed that the 'prospect of the first resurrection forbids the Church to rest on her own efforts, or to trust in the outward instruments she employs'. All hopes must be focused upon 'the person of the saviour' as 'the full triumph must visibly belong to the Lord alone'. No apparent want of success should discourage the Church as it can depend upon 'a mighty reserve of supernatural agency in the counsels of heaven, which shall vanquish every enemy, and complete her triumph'. Even the 'meanest labours of her children in the service of Christ are now seen to be linked in close and immediate union, with all the unutterable solemnity of that great day of the Lord's coming'.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Bickersteth, E., 'Address to Christian Ladies', in *C. M. S. Jubilee Papers* (London, 1848), pp. 20-1.

<sup>103</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The First Resurrection', pp. 257-8.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Politics and society**

Evangelicals were passionately concerned to reform society, while Evangelicalism was itself deeply influenced by contemporary political conflicts and social tensions. This complex interaction between Evangelical religion and society has been at the centre of recent historiographical debate. Attention has been drawn, in particular, to the role played by theological preoccupations in shaping Evangelical political and social thought.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores these issues through a detailed study of Birks's political convictions. It engages with Hilton's interpretation of the influence of Irvingism upon Evangelical political and social attitudes. It also uses Birks's career as the basis of a more general analysis of the changing character of Anglican Evangelical opinion.

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<sup>1</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988).

### Religion and Society

In considering the relationship between religion and society historians have tended to deal in generalizations and to pay insufficient attention to the complexities of motivation. It is, in practice, often extremely difficult to distinguish between secular and spiritual motivation. Much has been written, for instance, about the Victorian cult of 'respectability', which was in some ways a secular fashion but it has also been argued that many nineteenth-century missionaries regarded their particular passion for respectability as a product of their religion and an inspiration to greater personal spiritual dedication - a secular motive was, in effect, 'spiritualized'.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Evangelicals generally interpreted secular politics in terms of spiritual concerns. They actively campaigned against what they believed were the national 'sins' of Chartism, socialism and the promotion of 'Popery'. Moreover, given the established status of the Anglican Church, religious controversies and even theological disputes rarely lacked significant political overtones.

Evangelicals generally felt uncomfortable with the worldliness and petty rivalries of party politics and yet their desire to bring about a moral reformation of society required political mobilization if it was to be brought into effect. As, by 1830s, the role of the state was becoming increasingly wide-ranging, this dilemma came into greater prominence. C. R. Sumner, the Evangelical Bishop of Winchester, warned his clergy to stay aloof from the 'rivalries and struggles of party faction', but he also recognized there could 'be no public measures, of any

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<sup>2</sup>Piggin, S., 'Assessing nineteenth century missionary motivation: some considerations of theory and method', in Baker, D. (ed.), *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological problems for the Church Historian* (Oxford, 1978), p. 334.

importance, which do not exercise an influence directly or indirectly, upon the course of religion'.<sup>3</sup>

Another significant aspect of the changing political climate was the boom in pressure group politics during the 1830s, in which 'energetic religious groups and sympathetic political insiders together "moralized" politics'.<sup>4</sup> The anti-Slavery agitation had initiated this new style of extra-parliamentary campaign, and Evangelicals subsequently took up sides in the Corn Law controversy, the sabbatarian and anti-Roman Catholic crusades - campaigns all containing strong elements of biblicism, moral absolutism and other Protestant sensibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Evangelicals had adopted an essentially conservative political outlook, relating every detail of the political and social life of the nation to the will of God. Government itself was held to be divinely ordained, with subjects having a prime duty of obedience to it. Nations received daily mercies and gifts from God and all Christian nations, and especially the favoured nation of Great Britain, owed a duty of national worship and thanksgiving. Hence the principle of a nationally established state church was valued and defended by Anglican Evangelicals.<sup>6</sup> They believed that Rulers were duty bound to support national religion, obliged to love God and acknowledge His truths, and to uphold legislation that was rooted in the laws of Christian morality and the precepts and examples of Scripture.

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<sup>3</sup>Sumner, C. R. *Charge* (1833), quoted in Norman, E. R., *Church and Society in England, 1770-1970* (Oxford, 1976), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup>Carwardine, R., 'Evangelicals, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War: A Transatlantic Perspective' in Bebbington, D. W., Noll, M. A. and Rawlyk, G. A. (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York, 1994), p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>6</sup>Best, G. F. A., 'Evangelicals and the Established Church in the early nineteenth century', *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 10, 1959, p. 63.

Yet Evangelicals also felt a degree of unease concerning some aspects of the establishment, especially over some 'Catholic' elements in the Prayer Book and the tendency of Church institutions to take on a 'worldliness of tone'.<sup>7</sup> They were thus unable to place their full confidence in the established Church, despite its many practical benefits.<sup>8</sup>

Evangelicals tended to gloss their ambiguous position towards the establishment by stressing that, because of original sin, all human institutions, including the Church, were likely to be corrupted by sin. Birks contended that Evangelical Churchmen readily acknowledged 'the presence of practical evils' within the Church, but he also stressed that they drew a clear distinction between the faults of the 'visible' institutional Church and the purity of the 'invisible' Church of the elect.<sup>9</sup> While Birks defended the potential of the Anglican Church as a vehicle for 'purity and moral power', he also took care to appeal to the consciences of statesmen who ought to 'care more for the Word of God than for the special interests of the Church of England, and for the spiritual efficiency of the Church as a moral engine for the good of souls, than for the security of temporal endowments'.<sup>10</sup>

### The 'Age of Atonement' ?

Hilton has sought to distinguish two distinct strands within Evangelical political thought. He has argued that the 'moderate' approach of J. B. Sumner and Thomas Chalmers, which combined an Evangelical emphasis upon self-help individualism with Malthusian political economy, had a profound influence upon

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<sup>7</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis: in connection with Christian union and missionary labours' in Evangelical Alliance British Organization, *Occasional Papers* (London, 1854), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>Best, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup>Birks, T. R., 'On the general state and prospects of Christianity in Great Britain', in Steane, E. (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (London, 1852), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis...', p. 13.



early nineteenth-century politics. Subsequently as, from the 1820s, Irvingite influences were coming to prominence among Evangelical clerics, an increasing emphasis upon direct divine intervention in worldly affairs inclined a growing number of 'Recordites' towards an essentially paternalist form of political thought, contrasting sharply with the 'laissez-faire' outlook of the older generation of 'Claphamites'. The 'Recordites' advocated strict prescriptive government legislation fearing that, despite the best efforts of the church, the mass of society remained morally and spiritually destitute.<sup>11</sup>

Broadly speaking, the 'Claphamites' tended to place a greater emphasis upon the practical effects of government legislation, while the 'Recordites' tended to interpret legislation more narrowly, in terms of truth and error, Christianity and infidelity. During the debates surrounding Catholic Emancipation, for instance, leading 'Claphamites' like Simeon and Sumner supported the Bill on essentially practical grounds - they believed that the British Roman Catholic population was numerically insignificant and actually declining, posing no threat to the nation.<sup>12</sup> Daniel Wilson, the vicar of Islington, similarly defended his conversion to the cause of Catholic Emancipation on the basis that he perceived it as primarily a political, rather than a religious, question, arguing that conditions in Ireland had deteriorated despite the supposed advantages of penal legislation and that, once the Catholic laity had full civil rights, they would be less likely to fall under the sway of priests and nationalists.<sup>13</sup>

'Recordites', by contrast, mounted virulent polemical attacks on the Bill, centred on the argument that the state had a prime duty to uphold religious truth and condemn superstitious error. In contrast to the pragmatism of some eminent

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<sup>11</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 366.

<sup>12</sup>Wolffe, J. R., *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1860* (Oxford, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>13</sup>Young, H. V., Jr., 'The Evangelical Clergy in the Church of England, 1790-1850', unpublished PhD. thesis, Brown University, 1958, p. 243.

Evangelical clerics, Edward Irving and his followers interpreted the proposed legislation in terms of Biblical prophecy. Victory over Napoleon, Irving maintained, had confirmed Britain as the elect nation of prophecy, protected by the sealing angel from the six vials of divine wrath being unleashed upon the papal earth.<sup>14</sup> If the supremacy of the Protestant religion over the policy of the state was undermined then, Irving believed, Britain would be swept along to destruction with the papal nations under the seventh vial.<sup>15</sup>

Yet there was also substantial common ground shared by Evangelicals of both factions. The most important common factor linking 'Claphamites' and 'Recordites', and the central element in determining Evangelical political attitudes, was their pervading sense of sin, which underpinned their whole world view - as Bebbington has observed, 'The dynamic of the Evangelical approach to politics was hostility to sin'.<sup>16</sup> Their sense of sin drove the moral absolutism of their political campaigns, was reflected in the methods they adopted, in their unwillingness to compromise and sense of urgency.

Anglican pre-millennialists completely rejected the fatalistic asceticism of Irving and his immediate circle, which Hilton assumes to have been characteristic of all 'Recordites'. As members of the established church they stressed that they had a prime duty to promote the moral and spiritual welfare of the nation, and felt they had a responsibility to the nation to fight against the 'evils' of infidelity, Roman Catholicism and 'idolatry'.

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<sup>14</sup>Irving, E., *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these latter times, and until the second advent* (second edition, Glasgow, 1828), pp. 164, 188.

<sup>15</sup>'when the rulers of this nation shall permit, to the worshippers of the Beast, the same honours, immunities, and trusts, which they permit to the worshippers of the true God, that day will be the blackest in the history of our fate. That day our national charter is forfeited in heaven, and we are sealed no longer'. Irving, E., *op. cit.*, p. 546.

<sup>16</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 135.

Moreover, Hilton's argument that differing conceptions of providential theology formed the mainsprings of two distinct and contrasting Evangelical political stances ignores the fact that 'Claphamites' often also looked for special divine intervention as a retribution for national sins. Thomas Chalmers, for example, confided to Edward Bickersteth that he utterly despaired of 'the universal prevalence of Christianity, as the result of a pacific missionary process.' He looked for 'its conclusive establishment through a widening passage of desolating judgements, with the utter demolition of our present civil and ecclesiastical structures.'<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the organ of 'moderate' Evangelicalism, the *Christian Observer*, interpreted the outbreak of a cholera epidemic as a 'national visitation' punishing hedonism, commercial fraud, Sabbath desecration, and the continuing slave trade.<sup>18</sup>

Hence postmillennialist Evangelicals like Chalmers and pre-millennialists like Bickersteth and Birks largely shared a common view of providential theology. They all believed in an interventionist God, who could work through national judgements, and that providential intervention did not represent the fickle whims of a tyrannical divine despot, but that it could be clearly rationalized by reference to the Scriptural plan for man's redemption.

Nonetheless, it is possible to discern differences of tone and emphasis. Postmillennialists generally interpreted only the major national disasters, famines and epidemics as divine punishments for particular sins. Pre-millennialists, who were eager to identify the specific 'signs of the times' which would precede the return of Christ, were more inclined to view contemporary events in this light and their political polemic thus tended to be considerably more strident.

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<sup>17</sup>Chalmers, T., Letter to Edward Bickersteth 17 Feb. 1836, quoted in Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth*, II, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup>*Christian Observer*, Dec. 1831, p. 774.

### Church and State

The doctrine of a Christian nation, and the associated idea of national sins, dovetailed with the prophetic interests of Evangelical adventists. Irving's revival of the Old Testament concept of a covenanted nation, and its spiritual obligations, had been a major influence upon the young Birks, transforming his views on the establishment principle.<sup>19</sup> Birks had joined the Church of England on entering Cambridge University feeling compelled to do so by a duty to national religion.<sup>20</sup>

Birks classified his publications on the relationship between Church and state as part of his series of prophetic studies.<sup>21</sup> He declared that the lessons of political history, when seen in the light of Revelation, revealed that,

there are deep moral laws, which preside over the rise and fall of empires, and determine the exaltation of kingdoms to power and greatness, or their rapid decline into feebleness, anarchy and ruin.<sup>22</sup>

This outlook helps to explain the paradox, highlighted by E. R. Norman, that, despite the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) and Catholic Emancipation (1829), the ideal of a Protestant constitution continued to be a meaningful concept in public life for several decades.<sup>23</sup> Birks, along with other premillennialists, felt that political judgements should not depend upon immediate practical expediency, but be based upon Scriptural ideals, affirming that, 'The

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<sup>19</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, July 27 1883.

<sup>20</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Preface', *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870).

<sup>21</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, July 27 1883.

<sup>22</sup>Birks, T. R., *Protestant Truth the Basis of National Prosperity* (London, 1848), p. 24.

<sup>23</sup>Norman, E. R., *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (London, 1968), p. 19.

nation and kingdom that will not serve' God 'shall perish; yes that nation shall be utterly consumed'.<sup>24</sup>

Hence the principle of religious nationality, broadly conceived, remained a vital element in Evangelical political thought. Indeed, the Protestant nature and public role of the established church now seemed to be even more important given the development and political success of Catholicism and Nonconformity. Anglican Evangelicals found themselves fighting an increasingly bitter rearguard action, relying upon the establishment as the essential bastion against liberalism, national infidelity and social revolution.<sup>25</sup> The *Record*, from its foundation in 1828, vociferously supported the establishment principle and groups of Evangelicals founded the Christian Influence Society (1832) and Established Church Society (1834) to defend it.

The crisis in relations between church and state continued to dominate political life into the 1840s. Moreover, the impact of the Scottish Disruption (1843), together with the fact that the seemingly relentless rise of 'Puseyism' within the English Church appeared to be threatening something similar in its ranks,<sup>26</sup> refocused Evangelical attention on their divided loyalties to the 'visible' and 'invisible' churches.

In this context, Peel's apparent betrayal of the Protestant cause by proposing, in 1845, to increase and make permanent the state endowment of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth was all the more alarming. Anglican Evangelicals opposed the Maynooth Bill with particular vehemence and they became involved in organized political campaigns against it to an unprecedented

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<sup>24</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. E. Gladstone, 22 February 1848, British Library Add. Ms. 44,367 ff. 85-92.

<sup>25</sup>Norman, E. R., *Church and Society in England, 1770-1970* (Oxford, 1976), p. 95.

<sup>26</sup>Although Tractarians had been scornfully attacked in the pages of the *Record* from the 1830s (Altholz, J. L., 'The *Record* and Religious Journalism', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 1987, 20, p. 25), Evangelical opposition greatly intensified following the publication of J. H. Newman's notorious treatment of the Thirty-Nine Articles in *Tract XC* (1841) and dominated the Evangelical press during the early 1840s.

extent. Societies like the Protestant Association tended to identify the defence of the Protestant cause with the defence of the nation from the subversive threats of both Catholicism and Irish nationalism.

This powerful fusion of religion and conservative patriotism was bound up with, and fuelled by, adventist rhetoric. Evangelical polemic, once again, focused on the notion that Christian rulers were obliged to protect the vital interests of the Church, resisting *superstition*, and *they risked divine retribution* if they failed to fulfil their obligations. Birks argued, for instance, that the Maynooth Bill had been introduced because the government had been guilty of 'two grand errors; ignorance of national duty, and ignorance of the true nature of Popery.'<sup>27</sup>

The mainstay of Birks's position, and the central theme of his treatise *The Christian State* (1847), was that the doctrine of national responsibility was at the heart of divine prophecy and its relationship to historical events. Its scriptural basis was the nature of kingly office described in the Gospel, the character of the visible Church in it, the examples of Jewish magistrates and the numerous intimations of Jesus in his prophecy revealing the destinies of the Churches to the end of time. Rulers must, therefore, govern in fear of God, according to the Word, guarding the spiritual welfare of the nation and promoting national worship.

Birks declared that the 'whole force' of moral objections to such a conception of national religion must depend upon the denial of an essential truth held by all Christians - that the personal creed of individuals could not be a matter of mere indifference. On the contrary, Christians believed that it was the duty of 'every individual' to 'learn and receive the truth of God'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, September 25 1845.

<sup>28</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Christian State: or, the first principles of national religion* (London, 1847), p. 22.

Similarly, arguments for state neutrality in religion on the grounds of social justice had to be seen in the light of the prime Christian duty of rulers. If a national government were to 'sink all distinctions in the mere fact, that such and such opinions are actually held, with no reference to their truth or falsehood, their wholesome or pernicious tendency' it would represent the 'Saturnalian triumph of infidelity, the reign of chaos restored in the moral world'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Birks affirmed, the objection should be reversed as it 'cannot be just in rulers to deny God, because many of their subjects have sinned, and do sin, against Him'.<sup>30</sup>

Scriptural objections to the principle of national religion had, Birks claimed, depended upon misinterpretations of two particular passages of the Biblical text: Christ's reply to Pilate describing his kingdom as not of this world and his statement to the Pharisees concerning the tribute owed to Caesar. The former had, Birks argued, been viewed with hindsight - Pilate could not have been seeking to understand the future relationships between Christ's followers and their subsequent governors.<sup>31</sup> In any case, as the other disputed passage implies, it is possible to make a clear distinction between the duty of private Christians towards heathen rulers and that of Christian rulers towards their own subjects whether Christian or heathen - in the former case Christianity did not sanctify rebellion or treason and that was also the question which Pilate wanted answered. The duty of a Caesar who had himself been converted to the faith would have been a different case entirely.<sup>32</sup>

With regard to Christ's description of the kingdom, Voluntarists had assumed an implied contrast between the combination of the spiritual and secular under the Jewish dispensation and the Gospel kingdom. Christ's declaration that

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 55 - 56.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 57 - 58.

'now is my kingdom not from hence' (John XVIII, 36) had been interpreted as meaning that, in the future dispensation of the Gospel, a worldly character would not be part of the kingdom of God. Birks insisted that Christ's statement actually referred to the immediate context of the interrogation by Pilate; the word 'now' in his answer was not an adverb of time but an inference from his previous statement - if his kingdom had been of this world then his disciples would have resisted his arrest but they had not fought and, therefore, his kingdom was not of this world.<sup>33</sup>

Christ's kingdom is not from this world but he declares himself, in Pilate's sense of the word, a king; all 'power in heaven and earth is given to Him, and all mankind must be either his subjects or his enemies'.<sup>34</sup> Earthly rulers owed a special allegiance to this supreme sovereign and 'in this kingdom, our Lord himself being witness, neutrality is impossible'.<sup>35</sup>

The state was itself a divine ordinance and its rulers were ministers of God, representatives of 'Divine power' and 'God's judicial majesty'.<sup>36</sup> The kingly office, according to Scripture, was to exercise, by administering rewards and punishments, 'some part of God's moral government and kingly authority, and thus to repress all that is hurtful and ruinous, and encourage all things pure and holy'.<sup>37</sup>

Hence the 'highest function' of the state was to 'receive from the Church the message of salvation'.<sup>38</sup> Rulers were obliged to honour this divine truth and 'to recognize nationally, in the visible Church, the Divinely appointed ordinance,

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 58 - 59.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 363 - 364.



by which true religion and the gospel of Christ are to be maintained and diffused'.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, the unity of nations in the sight of God was 'a deep reality of Divine Providence'. It was a 'truth subordinate to that great doctrine of our faith, on which the whole mystery of our redemption depends, the moral unity of the whole race of mankind'.<sup>40</sup> Nations owed collective obligations 'towards God and man', and were 'capable of entering into national covenant with their Maker, or of increasing His anger by a national rejection of His laws'.<sup>41</sup>

Hence Christians must not 'cease to aspire after perfection, because, in this mortal life, it may never be fully attained'. Their personal holiness is always incomplete and imperfect, because of the spiritual burdens of sin and death, yet they are still obliged to obey the commandments and to strive after righteousness. Similarly, there have been imperfections in every age of the church and Christ's prayer for unity among his followers 'will never be fully answered till the time of His coming', but it would be a 'grievous sin' to 'rest content with strife and division' and, equally, the 'law of duty' is 'the very same in the constitution of the Christian State, and the obligations' of rulers.<sup>42</sup>

Scriptural prophecies confirmed that the 'various parts of the Church' would 'attain their perfect union, only in the day of the resurrection' and that was 'a full encouragement to every effort for the present growth of peace and unity'.<sup>43</sup> The ideal of nations paying full homage to the Lord 'may be only in that world to come, and that new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Yet the prospect

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 649.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 651.

should animate and sustain our present witness for these great and holy lessons of national duty'.<sup>44</sup>

Many other prominent Anglicans, including Gladstone, had felt compelled to abandon their defence of the ideal of national religion by the political upheavals of the 1840s. After the Maynooth controversy, Gladstone's approach was characterized by an effort to draw a clear distinction between 'the abstract and the practical views of the subject'.<sup>45</sup> He had come to believe that the state could no longer return any allegiance to an abstract Christianity when the concrete Christianity of the visible Church had already been deposed from its position of special privilege.

Birks, by contrast, denied that it could be right to assist actively in stripping the state of its remaining Christian elements, simply because it was not, nor likely to be, so thoroughly Christian as could be desired. He used the analogy of parish ministry - ministers all professed to follow the example of Jesus, but always had individual shortcomings, personal failings and temptations. On the principle advanced by Gladstone in politics, a minister ought to 'lay aside all the relics of Chn ministry that adhere 2 him [sic]' and the public should 'lend him not our vote, but what would be equivalent, our counsel, to find a state of stable equilibrium at the opposite pole of total immorality'.<sup>46</sup>

Birks thus continued to regard issues like the proposed admission of Jews to Parliament in clear-cut terms of religious truth and error. Any attempt to set aside the truth or falsehood of different creeds as irrelevant would mean that no

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 651.

<sup>45</sup>Gladstone, W. E., Letter to J. Hannah, 8 June 1865, quoted in Butler, P. A., *Gladstone: Church, State and Tractarianism* (Oxford, 1982), p. 130. Gladstone still maintained, as he had argued in *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838), that the state was a moral entity with a duty to promote religious truth, but believed that it could no longer give exclusive support to one interpretation of the truth (Bell, P. M. H., *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1969), pp. 70-80).

<sup>46</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. E. Gladstone, 22 February 1848, ff. 85-92.

law could possibly 'subsist' in the ensuing 'moral chaos'.<sup>47</sup> God had recently inflicted the Irish Famine (1847) as a 'blight upon' the land as a consequence of the 'national patronage' of 'idolatry', in the form of the Maynooth Grant, and so it would be utter folly to cast aside the remaining religious tests for M. P. s. Such a measure would 'avail nothing when Christ, the Prince of princes, shall send either famine or pestilence upon a guilty and rebellious land'.<sup>48</sup>

### Social Thought

Hilton has argued that 'Claphamites' like Thomas Chalmers, who had assimilated Malthusian political economy, advocated individual voluntary effort to overcome poverty, while 'Recordites', preoccupied with the notion of national sins and divine retribution, were essentially paternalist in outlook, stressing the need for government intervention to effect moral and social reform.<sup>49</sup> Yet S. J. Brown has presented Chalmers' work in Glasgow as actually reflecting an ideal notion of a paternalist, covenant inspired, commonwealth.<sup>50</sup> Hilton maintains that Chalmers' parochial activities can still be reconciled with a typically 'Claphamite' and 'laissez-faire' approach to social thought as a distinction must be drawn between his moral paternalism and his economic individualism.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, Chalmers' parochial and voluntary approaches to the problem of urban poverty can be seen as a 'laissez-faire' strategy, in the sense that he opposed compulsory state poor relief, but the basis of his work in Glasgow was the assimilation of

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<sup>47</sup>Birks, T. R., *A Letter to the Right Hon. Lord John Russell, M. P., on the admission of Jews to Parliament* (London, 1848), p. 16.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>49</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>50</sup>Brown, S. J., *Thomas Chalmers and the godly commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>51</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 85-89. Bebbington has suggested that Hilton has underestimated the central importance of the Evangelical doctrine of justification by faith, pointing out the paradox of those Evangelicals who appear to have advocated economic 'self-help' while holding views on justification which ruled out any form of spiritual 'self-help'; 'Religion and Society in the Nineteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, 32, 4, 1989, p. 1002.

urban areas into existing rural parishes, with their networks of ministers and visitors, which was an approach involving an interventionist and paternalistic role for the church and its associated organizations.

The church was duty bound to aim to reform the moral and spiritual character of the poor and this, in turn, would encourage them to have a frugal self - reliance that was the key to improving their material well being. It was, of course, this moral reformation of society that would ultimately render state provision unnecessary - for Chalmers poverty was the result of individual moral weakness and could only be remedied by 'sustained evangelical tuition'.<sup>52</sup>

Chalmers' emphasis upon the moral reform of individuals was, in essence, the traditional, and characteristic, Evangelical position. It was also generally shared by the 'Recordites' whose views were closer to the Evangelical mainstream and often more flexible than Hilton's account suggests. Henry Drummond, for example, who had been one of Irving's earliest followers and is one of Hilton's main illustrative examples of the 'Recordite' view, supported the repeal of the Corn Laws, in 1846, on the grounds of economic principle and natural justice, even though he was fearful of the political forces and providential catastrophes which repeal might unleash.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the *Record* newspaper itself actually supported Chalmers' tough stand on Poor Law reform, opposing current laws as interfering with the natural operation of social forces.<sup>54</sup>

Hence the situation was more complex than Hilton's account suggests and Hilton's categorisation of Evangelical social attitudes is inadequate. While it may be possible to discern certain differences of emphasis between 'Claphamites' and 'Recordites', there was also a large measure of agreement between them. Firstly,

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<sup>52</sup>Chalmers, T., 'The Political Economy of the Bible' quoted in Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>54</sup>Lewis, D. M., *Lighten Their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-Class London, 1828-1860* (Westport, 1986), p. 152.

Evangelicals clerics who, like the 'Claphamite' J. B. Sumner and the 'Recordite' A. R. C. Dallas, often came from an aristocratic or privileged background, shared a commitment to the defence of a static and divinely ordained social hierarchy and adopted a paternalistic attitude to their flock.<sup>55</sup> Birks declared that the social inequalities in this 'happy island' were 'softened and harmonized under the daily influence of Divine truth' and that 'faith in Christ, and labours in His cause' gave 'humility to the peer and dignity to the peasant'.<sup>56</sup>

Secondly, as social inequalities were created by God in order to try human virtues, Evangelicals drew a clear distinction between honourable poverty and idle vagrancy, recognising that the former was the 'natural lot of many in a well constituted society'.<sup>57</sup> It necessitated a degree of paternalistic charity, on the part of the wealthy, to ensure that poverty did not rise to unacceptable levels.<sup>58</sup>

This conservative Evangelical paternalism was combined, in certain cases, with some aspects of fashionable political economy - Sumner, for instance, took on board Malthusian ideas while continuing to stress that it was the duty of the wealthy to ameliorate social evils. The *Christian Observer* also generally supported Chalmers' tough moralism but disagreed with his view on the Poor Laws.<sup>59</sup> Lewis distinguishes this approach from the narrower and less accommodating paternalism of those Evangelicals associated with the Christian Influence Society (1832), which was centred upon a concern to defend the role of the established church in national life. As representatives of this outlook he cites influential figures like R. B. Seeley, Lord Ashley and Charlotte Elizabeth,

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<sup>55</sup>N. A. D. Scotland, 'J. B. Sumner, 1780-1862: Claphamite Evangelical Pastor and Prelate', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester*, 1992, 74, 1. Bowen, D., 'Alexander R. C. Dallas, The Warrior-Saint', in Phillips, P. T. (ed.), *The View From the Pulpit*, pp. 17-45.

<sup>56</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis...', p. 14.

<sup>57</sup>Sumner, J. B. *A treatise on the records of creation* (London, 1816) quoted in Scotland, N. A. D., *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>59</sup>Lewis, D. M., *op. cit.*, p. 152.

together with the *Churchman's Monthly Review* (1841). This journal was Calvinist, Conservative and premillennialist in emphasis and strongly opposed to free trade.

The *Churchman's Monthly Review* was also involved in a controversy with the *Record*, during the 1840s, over political economy, which further demonstrates that there was not necessarily a direct connection between the providential theology of premillennialist adventism and specific social attitudes.<sup>60</sup> While the *Record* used much of the 'natural law' rhetoric of political economy in discussing social questions, it also retained a degree of paternalism and opposed Corn Law repeal.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, premillennialism does appear to have had some influence upon the tone and emphasis of Evangelical social thought. Hilton has claimed that Evangelical adventists cared for social improvement in spite of their belief in the world's imminent destruction because they did not think of it as improving the world, but as 'merely' seeking to try to 'protect' their social inferiors 'from the stormy blasts'.<sup>62</sup> Here Hilton underestimates the importance attached to the concept of a covenanted nation and national religion, which was closely integrated with the historicist view of Revelation, and which strengthened the commitment of premillennial adventists to the vital social role of the established church in improving the moral welfare of the population. Their emphasis upon national sins, combined with the feeling that the second advent was near at hand, added a forceful sense of urgency to their campaigns against national immorality.

Indeed, Birks affirmed that the 'claims of religion' upon national governments included not only the 'direct duties of national worship' but also 'the

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<sup>60</sup>Cf. Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 94 ff.

<sup>61</sup>Lewis, D. M., *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>62</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 213.

whole field of political economy, in the various efforts to be made for the temporal prosperity of the whole nation'.<sup>63</sup>

Hence while J. B. Sumner and the *Christian Observer* talked in general terms of the social obligations of the wealthy, premillennialists tended to adopt a more uncompromising moral position. The *Churchman's Monthly Review* harshly denounced both the ungodliness of the rich and the idleness of the poor. Similarly, premillennialists were quick to interpret the Irish Famine (1847) as a judgement upon national sins, making much of the fact that the blight had set in only a month after the passing of the Maynooth Act. Birks, for instance, believed that 'The hand of God has been lifted up in famine' as a chastisement for the state support of national unbelief and indifference to Scriptural truth.<sup>64</sup>

### Conclusion

Birks and his Evangelical contemporaries saw no distinction between the civil and the sacred. Birks conceived politics and society from within a theological frame of reference and this continued to be the basis of his position despite the further constitutional upheavals of the later nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup>

Birks had summarized his political stand-point in his correspondence with Gladstone in 1848. The principle of religious establishments reflected on the nature of religious truth itself, as well as on the future destiny of the nation and national religion. Government was, Scripture made clear, ordained by God and, although it was exercised through fallible human institutions and so would always be imperfect, rulers were duty bound to curb both their own sins and those of their subjects. Rulers also had a prime obligation to recognize, in the

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<sup>63</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Christian State*, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup>Birks, T. R., *Protestant Truth the Basis of National Prosperity* (London, 1848), p. 33.

<sup>65</sup>See Chapter 8.

visible Church, the ordinance of Christ, to sanction its corporate claims and appointed functions. Christ was ultimately 'the true Head of all political, as well as ecclesiastical power' and so 'kings and princes should publicly worship at his footstool, & consecrate themselves and all their authority, to His holy and blessed service'.<sup>66</sup>

The analysis of Birks's views in this chapter has challenged some aspects of Hilton's categorisation of Evangelical thought in terms of the division between 'Claphamites' and 'Recordites'. It has been argued that in politics and social thought Evangelicals shared much common ground. Both 'Claphamites' and 'Recordites' shared an Evangelical emphasis upon personal sin and an overriding concern for the moral welfare of the population.

While Sumner and Chalmers took on some aspects of natural law Malthusianism, they nonetheless, like the 'Recordites' of Birks's generation, saw the world as primarily an arena of moral trial and, given man's fallen state, were resigned to the fact that relatively little could be achieved. The 'Recordites', as the debates of the 1840s demonstrate, were also often willing to combine the traditional Evangelical moral paternalism with a degree of economic individualism, as long as it did not undermine the former.

Hilton's stereotypical conception of premillennialist 'Recordites', as fatalistic and ascetic pessimists, has also been shown to be simplistic and inappropriate, at least as far as most Evangelical Anglicans were concerned. Evangelical Churchmen, like Birks, were fatalistic in the sense that they believed human society was ultimately doomed to face divine judgement and that it was utterly futile to try to ameliorate the social consequences of sin, which was regarded as the root of poverty. Yet their expectation of impending judgement

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<sup>66</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. E. Gladstone, 22 February 1848, British Library, Add. Ms. 44,367, ff. 85-92.



inspired them to make even greater efforts to awaken a sinful society to the perils it faced. Indeed, their despair at the prospects of a sinful nation actually fuelled their desire to triumph against the odds - Biblical prophecy gave them the encouragement that zeal which now might appear foolish would be turned to complete victory by the triumphant return of the Saviour who would vindicate His followers and destroy the enemy.<sup>67</sup>

Equally, there was an ever-present fear of divine judgement upon them if they failed in their enterprise of bringing the government and nation to God. As Evangelical adventists thus viewed the second coming with a combination of hope and fear, they tended to interpret politics in terms of a series of great national moral and spiritual crises to which they responded by launching vigorous campaigns against particular national 'sins', a trend typified by the anti-Maynooth agitation of the 1840s.

Similarly, the prospects for Church and State were regarded with a combination of optimism and pessimism. Bickersteth, for example, eulogised the Church's 'mighty mission' to 'prepare the way for that happier state, near at hand, when the whole earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord', yet he also felt that all his hopes were tinged with 'the humbling and sanctifying sorrow, that our country as a country, with Christian kingdoms in general, nationally rejecting the gospel, must previously undergo national judgements.'<sup>68</sup>

Hence the prophetic interests of premillennialists were closely integrated with their doctrine of a Christian nation and the idea of national sins. Similarly, during the 1840s, the sense of political crisis at home and abroad spurred

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<sup>67</sup>Sandeen, E. R., *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 3-4. Equally Birks, unlike the Irvingites, did not despise missionary efforts as futile and vain attempts to do God's work for him - he actively supported them. Chapter 5 discusses how efforts to reclaim Roman Catholics and to win the heathen for the faith were an integral part of his ideological outlook.

<sup>68</sup>Bickersteth, E., Letter to Lord Shaftesbury, 1847, quoted in Birks, T. R., *Memoir*, II, p. 382.

adventist expectation, creating a highly charged fusion of religion and patriotism. For Birks, the ominous portent of the European revolutions of 1848 clearly demonstrated the importance of the Protestant Bible as the basis of Britain's constitution - it was the only bastion against revolution and gave rise to Britain's divine mission to civilize and convert the world.<sup>69</sup>

Such attitudes underpinned the Evangelical commitment to the defence of the role and status of the established church, helping to explain the unwillingness of Churchmen like Birks to accept the pragmatic stance of leading contemporary politicians. If national obligations were abandoned, Birks declared, nations faced severe divine judgements and 'those only may hope to be shielded in time of trouble, who have done their utmost to resist the downward course of national apostasy, and thus to hinder the disastrous consumption of judgement and woe'.<sup>70</sup>

Birks told Gladstone that he could not 'in the least approve the maxim, aut Caesar, aut nihil, applied to the relations of the State with either abstract or concrete Christianity'. He declared that,

Our duty is first to determine the true ideal, & then to approach as nearly as we may, & not to hurry away from it with quickened paces because we despair of its full attainment.<sup>71</sup>

There was, therefore, a deep-seated and fundamental tension between the Evangelical promotion of religious and spiritual purity and the practical complexities of national political and Church life. An Evangelical moral absolutism and perfectionism, which stemmed from fervent adventist hopes, sat uneasily with the approval of the social status quo and an unwillingness to become involved in party politics.

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<sup>69</sup>Birks, T. R., *Protestant Truth*, p. 25.

<sup>70</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Christian State*, pp. 30 - 31.

<sup>71</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. E. Gladstone, March 11 1848, British Library, Add. Ms. 44, 367, ff. 103-4.

Birks's adventist convictions had led him to articulate an uncompromising interpretation of national duties and sins which formed the basis of a political stance that sharply contrasted with Gladstone's approach. Gladstone's distinction between the ideal and practical role of the state in religious matters entailed, for Birks, the intolerable victory of a sinful national apostasy that was sure to bring a dreadful divine judgement upon the nation.

## CHAPTER V

### Pan-Evangelicalism and Protestant Defence

It has been argued that conversionism, the belief that individual lives had to be transformed by the direct action of the Holy Spirit, was an essential defining feature of Evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> Individual conversion experiences appear to have been integral to the missionary impulse<sup>2</sup> and to have underpinned nineteenth-century anti-Roman Catholicism, as the Roman Church was seen as denying and persecuting those things that were perceived to be the basis of the personal spirituality of Evangelicals and of their individual response to God.<sup>3</sup>

Evangelicals also shared the common assumption that Roman Catholics, as well as the heathen, were to be numbered among the unregenerate<sup>4</sup> and their vigorous attempts to convert both groups were closely related to their own personal sense of sin. Edward Bickersteth, writing to his daughter Elizabeth,

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<sup>1</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 5-10.

<sup>2</sup>Piggin, S., 'Assessing nineteenth century missionary motivation: some considerations of theory and method' in Baker, D., *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 334-5.

<sup>3</sup>Wolffe, J. R., 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860', in Bebbington, D. W., Noll, M. A. and Rawlyk, G. A. (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York, 1994), pp. 183-4.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 181.

observed that, 'you and I, though we hate the Pope, may have plenty of self-popery', a tendency to 'be looking to ourselves and our own doing for salvation' rather than simply living 'by faith in Jesus' and, like 'an empty vessel, to take all out of His fullness'.<sup>5</sup>

This form of individualistic Evangelical piety was somewhat uneasily combined with an awareness of the vital spiritual unity existing among 'true' believers.<sup>6</sup> Evangelical conceptions of the unity existing among members of the 'invisible' church were explicitly, and self-consciously, contrasted with what was regarded as 'Popish' uniformity in the strategy of organizations like the Evangelical Alliance (1846). Yet disputes concerning the actual degree of latitude allowable to the liberty of the individual conscience severely inhibited the practical effectiveness of bodies like the Alliance.<sup>7</sup>

The desire for Evangelical unity had been articulated more explicitly from the 1840s, as the 'Popish' threat to British Protestantism appeared to have become more prominent, the relationship between church and state to be in turmoil and the need for missions to promote the gospel at home and abroad seemed greater than ever. Indeed, the daunting scale of the task then facing Evangelicals appears actually to have reinforced their confidence in their own God-given talents and to have underpinned their growing optimism regarding the prospects for the spread of the gospel and for pan-evangelical co-operation. The Evangelical mood was one of 'self-doubting confidence',<sup>8</sup> a disposition that was closely related to the growing influence of adventism upon Evangelical thought.

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<sup>5</sup>28 January 1836, quoted in Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (London, 1852), II, p. 89. Elizabeth Bickersteth married T. R. Birks in 1845.

<sup>6</sup>Wolffe, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>7</sup>Brown, R. S., 'The Evangelical Succession ? Evangelical history and denominational identity', *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. LXVIII, no. 1, January 1996, pp. 7-10.

<sup>8</sup>Piggin, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-7.

This chapter presents an analysis of Birks's views on pan-evangelical co-operation and the Roman Catholic controversy, exploring how these aspects of the Evangelical mentality worked themselves out in practice. It also discusses the importance of adventism in shaping Birks's ideological commitment to pan-evangelicalism and Protestant defence.

### The influence of adventism

Edward Bickersteth's famous and highly popular published sermon *A Divine Warning* (1842), originally preached before the Protestant Association, typifies the adventist rhetoric increasingly being adopted by Anglican Churchmen to interpret the religious and political situation. Bickersteth, who readily acknowledged a debt to Birks's prophetic researches, condemned the three 'unclean spirits like frogs' coming out of the mouth of the dragon, which he identified as contemporary secularism, Neology, and Chartist unrest. He also perceived a specific warning to British Protestant churches in the text of Revelation (XVI, 12) concerning the recent 'revival of Romish principles' by the Oxford Movement and the dangerous consequences God had foretold would ensue.

Birks also felt that the revival of Catholic forms in Anglican worship had ominous implications:

When art and taste shall have lent it all the beauty of their decorations, and architecture all its grandeur, and antiquity all its mystery, and talent all the sorcery of its eloquence - then, amidst the sound of harp and psaltery and all pleasant music, the gigantic delusion may move on to its short triumph, and heat sevenfold the furnace of the last persecution for the Church of God.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Birks, T. R. 'The First Resurrection', in Bickersteth, E. (ed.), *The Second Coming, the Judgement, and Kingdom of Christ* (London, 1843), p. 248.

The anti-Catholic sentiment provoked by the proposed enlargement of the government grant to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth (1845) was, significantly, most potent in the Anglican Church where premillennial adventism had achieved greatest prominence. For exponents of historicist premillennialism there was no doubt that the Anti-Christ was Rome and that Maynooth, together with the recent conversion of Tractarian leaders to Catholicism, represented the final rise of the 'Christian Jezebel' in a 'proud and wicked insurrection of self-will against the visible delegate of Christ on the earth'.<sup>10</sup>

Evangelicals regarded their mission with a mixture of emotions, a curious combination of optimism and pessimism, that reflected the way in which they viewed the prospects of the second advent of Christ with feelings of hope and trepidation. The 'signs of the times' seemed to offer them grounds for both fear and hope; set-backs like the Maynooth Act (1845) seemed to be preliminaries to the final battle, or heralds of the millennium, and yet they also encouraged a more aggressive defence of Evangelical Christianity.

Bickersteth emphasized the great significance of the fact that the revolutions sweeping through Europe, in 1848, coincided with the jubilee celebrations of the Church Missionary Society, calling upon the supporters of the society to make a more vigorous commitment to the Protestant cause. While Bickersteth did not expect the conversion of the world to be completed until the Lord returned in glory, he felt there was nonetheless scriptural reason to expect swift progress in the conversion of individual souls. As the 'last days' were 'near' the 'Lord will pour out of His spirit on all flesh' and if 'this glorious temple' remained incomplete, Bickersteth argued, 'we may, like David, prepare the

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<sup>10</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Right Knowledge of Times and Seasons' in Birks, T. R. (ed.), *The Hope of the Apostolic Church* (London, 1845), p. 237.

materials, and hear the commendation of the Lord of all...and all the future glory of the house will be increased by the preparations which we are now making'.<sup>11</sup>

More active promotion of the gospel was thus perceived 'as both a necessary response to the signs of the times and as a means whereby the second coming itself would be hastened'.<sup>12</sup> These sentiments were expressed in Birks's hymn written for the C. M. S. Jubilee;

Now bid Thy angel speed his flight  
Amidst these gathering storms below,  
To shed Thy Gospel's glorious light  
O'er regions lost in sin and woe.

.....

The isles await Thy coming, Lord,  
A herald voice prepares Thy way,  
O haste the promise of Thy word,  
O bid the heathen own Thy sway.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of adventism is also reflected in the fact that levels of Evangelical anti-Catholic activity fluctuated considerably with a series of outbursts of activity at particular moments of crisis.<sup>14</sup> In 1850, for example, the alarm surrounding the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy provoked a short period of intense anti-Catholic feeling in the religious press and Parliament.<sup>15</sup>

The historicist world-view readily identified Pius IX's recent actions with a historical pattern of past abuses and to the predicted events of the last days.

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<sup>11</sup>Bickersteth, E., 'Practical Address to British Christians on the proposed Jubilee' in *C. M. S. Jubilee Papers* (no. iv), (London, 1848), p. 20-21.

<sup>12</sup>Porter, A. N., 'Late nineteenth-century Anglican missionary expansion: a consideration of some non-Anglican sources of inspiration' in Baker, D., *op. cit.*, p. 357.

<sup>13</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Fountain of life, eternal Lord' in *C. M. S. Jubilee Papers* (London, 1848).

<sup>14</sup>Similarly, Evangelical political commitment also tended to be stirred at particular moments of crisis in church and state, a trend discussed in chapters 4 and 8.

<sup>15</sup>Ralls, W. 'The Papal Aggression of 1850: A Study in Victorian Anti-Catholicism' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, vol. iv; Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 115-34.



Indeed, during the 'Papal Aggression' crisis, the rhetoric of Evangelical preachers seems to have been strikingly similar. John Cumming, for instance, addressing a London meeting organized by the Reformation Society, selected provocative passages from oaths on heretics in the *Pontificale Romanum* (1667) and the influential eighteenth-century Catholic theologian Alphonsus Liguori to argue that the nation was again 'at the commencement of a great crisis'. Cumming reached a rhetorical crescendo invoking Luther's isolation during a previous conflict with Papal authority, comparing British Protestantism to the British oak, the basis of 'England's strength, the stability of the throne, and the glory of her common country'. The national anthem was then sung at the close of the meeting.<sup>16</sup>

Birks, speaking before the Bristol auxiliary branch of the Protestant Alliance, also talked of a 'sudden emergency' that revealed Catholicism to be a 'seductive religion, and a political conspiracy'. He called on his audience to defend the 'truths of the Bible and the liberties of Englishmen'.<sup>17</sup> Birks also claimed that British Protestants were 'united in the common faith of the gospel ... and in patriotic zeal for our national independence' to 'defy all the Armadas and Gunpowder Treasons of the Church of Rome'.<sup>18</sup>

Birks affirmed that the contrasting fortunes of Catholic and Protestant states since the time of the Reformation was 'very remarkable and full of meaning'. The decline of the Spanish empire and Britain's rise to a position of unique prominence in art, science, political influence and colonial power was a striking fulfilment of prophecy. Recent Papal claims to jurisdiction over Britain had also been predicted by the prophetic warning of divine judgement upon 'the

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<sup>16</sup>Dr. Cumming's *Second Lecture on the Papal Aggression* (London, 1850), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Popery: its strength, and its weakness, as an aggressive power* (Bristol, 1852), pp. 22-24.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

mystic Babylon, who from her seat on the seven hills of Rome holds out her cup of enchantments, to intoxicate the nations'.<sup>19</sup>

### Pan-Evangelicalism

By the 1840s, Evangelical opinion was divided over the most appropriate means of promoting pan-evangelical co-operation. Donald Lewis has related this controversy to the contemporary debate concerning Apocalyptic interpretation, which saw Evangelical scholars disputing whether the Book of Revelation foretold the actual course of historical events to occur prior to the second advent or was a prediction concerning the great events of a future era introducing the millennium. Lewis contended that Evangelicals of the 'futurist' school rejected any practical attempts to further Evangelical unity, while 'historicists' felt compelled to support them.<sup>20</sup>

Lewis maintained that historicists attached a particular prophetic significance to the 1840s, pointing to the fact that leading Anglican historicists, notably Birks, Bickersteth and William Marsh, were involved in the foundation of the Evangelical Alliance (1846). He also cited futurists, like the Lancashire Evangelical leader Hugh McNeile, who attacked the Alliance as a presumptuous scheme to try to effect what only Christ himself could achieve at the advent.

Yet Anglican historicists, including Birks, were usually reluctant to indulge in speculation regarding the specific date of the advent. While they glossed historical events of past centuries in terms of direct prophetic references, and suggested possible parallels with Revelation for current events as evidence that they were living through the last days before the advent, they usually fell

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup>D. M. Lewis, *Lighten Their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-Class London, 1828-1860* (Westport, 1986), pp. 102-103.

short of setting out a time-table for the events still to occur. Moreover, by the 1840s, expectations of an immediate consummation had faded and most historicist commentators now allowed for a further interval before the advent.<sup>21</sup>

It is also important to note that most of Birks's Anglican colleagues in the Prophetic Society actually stayed aloof from the Alliance. In addition, those Anglicans who spoke publicly about refusing to join the organization tended not to use eschatological arguments to justify their actions but generally cited their unwillingness to compromise their prime duty to the Anglican Church. Hugh Stowell, for example, declared that his loyalty to the established church had to come before 'an association which appears to regard all the unhappy separations from our Church as comparatively unimportant, and to take it for granted that such separations must, and indeed ought to, continue.'<sup>22</sup>

This raises the question of why did Birks, and a small but significant number of like-minded Anglican historicists, opt to associate themselves with the Alliance? They certainly shared the commitment of McNeile and Stowell to the defence of the established church.<sup>23</sup> They also agreed with McNeile that true unity could only be fully achieved at the advent, but also argued that the Evangelical Alliance did not aim to create an artificial Church and strongly felt that emotional union was already a reality and should be formally recognized for good of all Protestants. Birks affirmed that,

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<sup>21</sup>The years 1792-3 were perceived, on reflection, to have marked only the beginning of the fall of the Papacy, rather than its actual defeat. By reconsidering the date when the Papacy had originally gained imperial patronage, writers like E. B. Elliott and J. Cumming focused attention on the years 1866-7 as the focal point of prophetic hopes; Froom, L. E., *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, 1946-54), vol. III, p. 704 ff. .

<sup>22</sup>*The Members of the Manchester Clerical Society...issued the following statement..* (Manchester, 1846).

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Chapter 4 for Birks's defence of the establishment principle.

There is now, more than ever, a yearning among real Christians of every name, after a closer union. And this desire itself may induce a hope that He who imparts it will cherish it into full growth, and crown it with the desired blessing.<sup>24</sup>

While Birks recognized the weaknesses of the Evangelical Alliance, as a human institution, he felt that the Holy Spirit could be seen to be at work in moves towards Christian union, as he believed it to have been in the recent and opportune cross-denominational support for the Anti-Maynooth campaign.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, it does seem that the adventist hope exercised a more general temperamental influence on Birks's own personal commitment to the Alliance, serving to reinforce his emotional loyalty to the organization. He believed that when Christ returned as the head of the elect church then that body would be consummated in eternal unity and, as he felt that this glorious return was imminent, his discussions of Evangelical unity continually stressed an urgent duty of readiness, earnest desire and joyful expectation. 'Christians', he declared, 'should work while it is day, because a night of sorrow and confusion may come, in which no man can work.'<sup>26</sup>

The impulse towards cross-denominational co-operation in the 1840s owed much to the rise of the Evangelical missionary movement. The churches of the Congregationalists Ralph Wardlaw and J. A. James sponsored L. M. S. missionaries to India and both men contributed to the *Essays on Christian Union* (1845), which helped to lay the foundation of the Evangelical Alliance.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, 25 September 1845.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>Birks, T. R., 'On the General State and Prospects of Christianity in Great Britain' in Steane, E. (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (London, 1852), p. 147.

<sup>27</sup>Piggin, S., 'Sectarianism versus Ecumenism: the Impact on British Churches of the Missionary Movement to India, c. 1800-1860', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 27, 4, Oct. 1976, p. 387-402. The L. M. S. jubilee, celebrated in 1845, had offered, according to Wardlaw, an opportunity for an 'exhibition of Christian unity for an interesting general object'; Letter to his son, quoted in Alexander, W. L., *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Ralph Wardlaw, D. D.* (Edinburgh, 1856), p. 428.

Edward Bickersteth was a former secretary of the C. M. S. and a prime mover of the Evangelical Alliance in England.

The Scottish Disruption (1843) had also focused attention, on both sides of the border, on the distinction between the visible and invisible churches and prompted the leading Scottish Free Church clerics Thomas Chalmers and R. S. Candlish to publish works on church union. In England the anti-Maynooth agitation similarly fostered a desire for closer Evangelical co-operation.<sup>28</sup>

The inaugural conference of the Evangelical Alliance, in 1846, had accepted Birks's resolution proposing that the Alliance ought not to be a new church but should aim to promote only that unity which existed among 'true disciples of Christ' simply by 'fraternal and devotional discourse'.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the majority of Anglican Evangelical clergy still held aloof from the organization and even Bickersteth ultimately felt sufficiently alienated by the Voluntarist tone of political Nonconformity to withdraw from the Alliance's activities.

Birks had been a founder member of the Alliance and subsequently went on to serve as an honorary secretary of the organization for twenty-one years. While he remained acutely aware of the limitations of the Alliance he defended his continuing loyalty to it as a spiritual obligation - he felt the cause of Christian union to be a 'blessed work' dear to 'the Great Head of the Church'. The Alliance was more than a political pressure group, it represented an 'effort' to 'heal the breaches of the spiritual Zion'.<sup>30</sup> In this context, he maintained, the denominational tensions within the Alliance had to be viewed from a theological

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<sup>28</sup>Wolffe, J. R., 'The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s: An attempt to institutionalise Christian unity', in Sheils, W. J. and Wood, D. (eds.), *Voluntary Religion, Studies in Church History* 23 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 336-340.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Kessler, J. B. A., Jr., *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain* (Goes, 1968), p. 42.

<sup>30</sup>Birks, T. R., Speech reported in *Evangelical Protestantism. Report of a Meeting convened by the Evangelical Alliance ... Feb. 27, 1851* (London, 1851).

perspective - divisions among Protestant denominations were the 'inevitable consequences of the fallen and imperfect state of human nature'.<sup>31</sup>

It is also possible to discern a further Irvingite influence upon Birks's outlook. Irving had gained early notoriety by attacking the bureaucratic approach of leading Evangelical societies and claiming that only the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit could spread the Gospel.<sup>32</sup> This view, that mission without the work of the Spirit was utterly worthless, remained prominent among Evangelical adventists and Henry Venn, Secretary of the C. M. S., believed that it was the key to understanding Bickersteth's attitude to missionary work. Bickersteth was, according to Venn, always careful to distinguish between the external framework and organization of missions and their spiritual character.<sup>33</sup>

In the same way, Bickersteth and Birks distinguished between the organizational difficulties and denominational divisions within the Evangelical Alliance and its spiritual essence. The daunting practical obstacles facing the Alliance seemed insignificant by comparison with their conviction that the Holy Spirit could be seen to be at work in its efforts to promote Christian unity. Indeed, the severity of the task facing the Alliance was, itself, interpreted as a sign of its transcendent importance, as causes that were thoroughly in accord with the Gospel were, it was felt, bound to meet with strong opposition.

Birks argued that it had been 'wise and necessary' that the Alliance had not attempted to create an artificial union of different churches, but had aimed, instead, at the 'recovery of that true Catholic unity, which sin has marred, and which Divine grace alone' could restore.<sup>34</sup> Judged on this basis, the Alliance's

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>33</sup>Venn, H., 'Character of Rev. Edward Bickersteth, Sec. C. M. S., 1815-1830' in Knight, W., *Memoir of the Rev. Henry Venn* (London, 1880), p. 166.

<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis: in connection with Christian union and missionary labours' in Evangelical Alliance British Organization *Occasional Papers* (London, 1854), p. 5.

foremost success was its having brought 'into clearer daylight' the 'precious jewel of truth' that the 'love of Christ has a stronger power to unite all His true servants than all the sin and error which still cleaves to them'.<sup>35</sup>

Birks also explained his spiritual commitment to the Alliance in terms of the struggle to inhibit the 'progress of Popery'.<sup>36</sup> Birks declared that God would bless the Christian spirit of Evangelical campaigns against 'Popery' as long as they maintained a sympathy for the souls of Catholics that was 'as deep and sincere' as their 'hatred' of the Catholic system was 'intense and profound'.<sup>37</sup> It was a system that, he believed, inevitably worked to 'degrade the intellects' and to 'stupify the consciences' of men.<sup>38</sup> Hence the Alliance had a prime duty to 'enlighten' the Protestants of the nation to the dangers of Roman Catholicism as both a 'false religion and a political tyranny', to convert and reclaim Catholics to the true faith and to 'free our country from the dangers which arise from the political influence and machinations of Rome'.<sup>39</sup>

### Protestant Defence

The theological argument against Roman Catholicism was centred on the question of what constituted the basis of doctrinal authority - Scripture or church tradition. The role of private judgement in interpreting Scripture was regarded by Evangelicals as lying 'at the very foundation of the Christian faith' - the Pope and his priests were assumed to have denied this, to have given greater authority to tradition, rather than Scripture, and were accused of duping the Catholic laity,

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Birks, T. R., *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth*, II, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis...', p. 19.

<sup>38</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Effects of the Roman Catholic Religion on the Intellect and Conscience of Man', in *The Falsities of Romanism Exposed in six lectures by Clergymen of the Church of England* (London, 1851), p. 78.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Present Crisis...', p. 16.

whom they denied access to the Bible, into blindly accepting anything they taught.<sup>40</sup> This dogmatic authoritarianism was presented, in Evangelical polemic, as leading inexorably to political tyranny and national ruin;

The country, where it establishes its supremacy, becomes at once a region of the shadow of death. Industry languishes, commerce dies away, genius is quenched in the gloom of superstition, social confidence and peace are destroyed by the confessional, and the full triumph of the system, when every bishop has purged his diocese of heresy, by the stake and the torture, consigns the happy land to a dreary reign of slavish torpor and moral desolation.<sup>41</sup>

'Popery' was not regarded as forming part of the true Apostolic church, but as a development from the human 'corruptions' already evident in the Biblical church. Pride and ambition, Birks sought to demonstrate, had existed even among Christ's disciples and the early Christian churches had contained elements of ceremonial superstition - all such faults had their 'consummation' in the 'spiritual ungodliness' of the modern 'Church of Rome'.<sup>42</sup>

The belief that the personal return of Christ was near at hand also gave a greater sense of urgency to Evangelical anti-Catholicism. Evangelical adventists trusted that their zeal would be recognized when 'the Lord will say of Britain and Britain's Church, in the day of His fierce vengeance, when he shall come to shake terribly the earth, and judgement shall begin at the house of God, "spare her, spare her, for there is a blessing in her"'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Birks, T. R., Speech reported in *Evangelical Protestantism. Report of a Meeting convened by the Evangelical Alliance ... Feb. 27, 1851* (London, 1851).

<sup>41</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Effects of the Roman Catholic Religion...', p. 86.

<sup>42</sup>Birks, T. R., *Popery in the Bud, and in the Flower* (London, 1853), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup>Stowell, H., 'The Roman Catholic and Protestant systems compared with reference to eternity', in *The Falsities of Romanism Exposed in six lectures by Clergymen of the Church of England* (London, 1851), pp. 158-9.



### Conclusion

The discussion of Birks's views in this chapter has demonstrated that, although Anglican Evangelicals had, during the 1830s and 1840s, eagerly adopted the organizational methods of contemporary pressure group politics, their commitment to anti-Roman Catholicism and Protestant defence was driven by an essentially spiritual impulse. Birks considered problems like the denominational divisions within the Evangelical Alliance not in terms of the great practical difficulties they presented, but from a theological perspective.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Birks's anti-Catholic hostility was related to fundamentally positive spiritual beliefs, although it issued in particularly aggressive and negative polemic during times of crisis, such as the Maynooth controversy, when those beliefs seemed most threatened. Hence anti-Catholicism helped to define the Evangelical sense of identity during the upheavals of the 1840s, with Evangelicals increasingly conceiving their self-understanding negatively, in terms of what they were fighting against, and Evangelicalism thus took on a more sectarian and polemical character.

Anti-Catholicism was also a positive force for Evangelical unity and an important factor in the formation of the Evangelical Alliance, enhancing the feeling of 'spiritual common ground' among its founding members.<sup>45</sup> Yet the anti-Catholic movement also, paradoxically, reflected the individualistic emphasis of Evangelicalism as the proliferation of anti-Catholic societies and publications, by the mid-1840s, allowed the individual Evangelicals who supported each of them

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. the theological framework of Birks's political opinions analysed in Chapter 4.

<sup>45</sup>Wolffe, J. R., 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860' in Bebbington, Noll and Rawlyk, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

to feel that their own personal conscience was clear, even if others might be regarded as less 'pure' or truly Evangelical.<sup>46</sup>

This lack of unity weakened Evangelical anti-Catholic campaigns and it also severely restricted the practical effectiveness of the Evangelical Alliance. The Alliance had been established as a loose spiritual fellowship, reflecting the disparate character of contemporary Evangelicalism, and even this level of co-operation was felt, by most Anglican Evangelicals, to be unacceptable.

Yet, despite its limited Anglican membership and internal divisions, the importance of the Alliance should not be underestimated. It was the first corporate expression of the ideal of Christian unity in the Evangelical movement as, unlike the interdenominational societies associated with the early stages of the Evangelical Revival, it had a specific 'ecumenical' purpose. It was also the first Evangelical body in which members of different churches were actively encouraged to pray together at meetings, giving rise to a new sense of unity among Protestants from different nations and churches.<sup>47</sup>

Birks's emotional loyalty to the causes of pan-evangelicalism and Protestant defence can be seen to reflect the influence of adventist expectations upon his temperament and outlook. From his premillennialist perspective, the atmosphere of religious and political uncertainty, in the 1840s, appeared particularly ominous. He interpreted events, in what he regarded as the final era before the predicted advent, with a combination of fear and hope. The 'true church' seemed to be rapidly losing ground to a buoyant Roman Catholicism and yet more optimistic feelings were stirred by recent revivals and the formation of the Free Church in Scotland.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>47</sup>Rouse, R., 'Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate' in Rouse, R. and Neill, S. C., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (London, 1967), p. 321.

Hence Birks contemplated the prospects for Evangelical causes with the same feelings of optimism and anxiety with which he considered the imminent second advent. The clear identification of the Pope as the anti-Christ of Revelation ensured that anti-Catholicism was an absolute 'and pivot of' his 'whole worldview',<sup>48</sup> adding an uncompromising stridency and sense of urgency to his polemical output. Nonetheless, Birks believed that the lessons of prophecy provided an assurance, in times of national and religious crisis such as the 'Papal Aggression', 'of a full and final, though perhaps a dear-bought victory' as the Papacy was 'doomed to utter ruin' by the 'repeated prophetic warnings of the Word of God'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Wolffe, J. R., 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860' in Bebbington, Noll and Rawlyk, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>49</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Popery*, p. 36.

## CHAPTER VI

### **Philosophy, science and Scripture**

Evangelicals were, by the 1850s, already beginning to perceive that the challenge posed by the Catholic revival was being superseded by the rise of an irreverent European rationalism. This movement, which appeared to have its roots in the French Revolution, was felt to have a blind confidence in man's unaided intellectual abilities and thus to be consciously rejecting the divinely offered means for the revelation of God's will.

Birks observed that the 'spread of natural science, and the increased intercourse with the Continent' had brought upon the Church 'a fiery ordeal of infidel speculations', leaving many of its members 'mistrustful of their old creed, and ready to be carried about by every wind of doctrine'. He predicted that 'Neology' was 'likely soon to be the chief temptation of the English clergy'.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the relationship between Evangelicals and this rapidly changing intellectual culture. It argues that Birks's published output demonstrates that the characteristic Evangelical veneration of Scripture did not necessarily serve to isolate educated Evangelicals from serious involvement with philosophical, scientific and critical debates.

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<sup>1</sup>Birks, T. R., 'On the General State and Prospects of Christianity in Great Britain' in Steane, E. (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (London, 1852), p. 149.

Birks studied the mathematical and physical sciences 'from childhood' and he continued, in later life, to sustain a particularly close interest in the discoveries of modern physics and astronomy.<sup>2</sup> He even produced his own general theory of physical change, attempting to provide a unified, Newtonian, explanation of the phenomena of light, electricity and heat.<sup>3</sup> He assimilated important aspects of Romantic philosophy, producing an attempted refutation of utilitarianism that was a major contribution to the ethical controversy at Cambridge. In response to the critical works of Coleridge and Strauss, he also mounted a detailed defence of the plenary inspiration of Scripture.

#### Utilitarianism

Hilton has suggested that early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism had accommodated the Butlerian view of conscience; that men were disposed to act virtuously because they derived pleasure from doing so, realising that they brought misery upon themselves by acting immorally. Thomas Chalmers, for example, had based his attack on utilitarianism, in his Bridgewater Treatise (1833), on the principle that man had been endowed with a conscience, the satisfaction of which coupled righteousness with pleasure, and which thus provided the best evidence for the existence of divine moral perfection in creation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Indestructibility of Force', *Transactions of the Victoria Institute* vol. IX, 1875, p. 317. Science teaching was also actively promoted at Mill Hill school when Birks was a pupil there: in 1828 two series of lectures were arranged on natural and experimental philosophy and lectures on chemistry and astronomy were given to the whole school. Professor Challis, one of the discoverers of Neptune, had also been a pupil there during this same period (Brett-James, N. G. *Mill Hill* (Glasgow, 1938), p. 33. In 1833, while the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was taking place in Cambridge, Birks was invited to the Observatory to be introduced to Sir John Herschel and Sir David Brewster; Birks, T. R., Letter to S. Birks, 24 June 1833, Birks family papers.

<sup>3</sup>Birks, T. R., *On Matter and Ether, or, The Secret Laws of Physical Change* (Cambridge, 1862).

<sup>4</sup>Gillispie, C. C., *Genesis and Geology: A study in the relations of scientific thought, natural theology, and social opinion in Great Britain* (Harvard, 1951), p. 214.

While utilitarian ethics had been a long established part of the Cambridge curriculum, they were, by the 1830s, increasingly being criticised by a rising generation influenced by continental Romanticism. Young scholars like William Whewell and Julius Hare were unsympathetic to this morality of consequences and its apparent effect - the lack of spiritual feeling among students.<sup>5</sup>

Birks's Trinity Prize essay, *The Analogy of Mathematical and Moral Certainty* (1834), was an attack on utilitarianism reflecting the Romantic ideas then coming into vogue at Cambridge. Birks condemned the 'selfish theories' which 'but for the charmed girdle that subtle thought had placed around them, the first warm feeling of the heart would have melted away'.<sup>6</sup>

Birks was attempting to overcome the contrast between the security of natural knowledge and the supposed vagueness of moral philosophy. He aimed to demonstrate that a concern with intuitive ethical principles was consistent with the character of scientific knowledge. He argued, following Coleridge, that knowledge in both fields rested on intuitive laws of thought (*Reason*) and the information furnished by the senses (*Understanding*). Applied science involved the inductive reasoning from sense impressions towards 'dependent' postulates, while pure science was based on postulates that 'spring from the intuitive laws of thought'. The degree of certainty to which each tended 'may in like manner be termed pure or mixed, as the principles on which it rests are absolute or

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<sup>5</sup>Preyer, R. O., 'The Romantic Tide Reaches Trinity: Notes on the Transmission of New Approaches to Traditional Studies at Cambridge, 1820-1840', in Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.), *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981), p. 45 and Williams, P., 'Passing on the Torch: Whewell's Philosophy and the Principles of English University Education' in Fisch, M. and Schaffer, S. (eds.), *William Whewell, A Composite Portrait* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 135-140.

<sup>6</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Analogy of Mathematical and Moral Certainty* (1834, reprinted in *First Principles of Moral Science* London, 1873), p. 309. Birks's *Analogy*, together with Adam Sedgwick's recent attack on the place of utilitarian ethics in the university curriculum (*Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge*, 1832), 'mark the point at which philosophy at Cambridge began its public resistance to empiricism and utilitarianism'; Schneewind, J. B., *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, 1977), p. 89.

dependent'.<sup>7</sup> Thus the applied sciences have 'their respective parent truths, and the pure science from which they spring its intuitive principles undemonstrated and underived'.<sup>8</sup>

The principle forming the basis of mathematical science was the consciousness, furnished by our senses, of the existence of an external and material world. Similarly moral science rested upon a moral consciousness, derived from a 'fountain-truth, as simple, and even more deep in its intuitive certainty - the inward consciousness of Will, and that fixed sense of responsible being, which at once proclaims the soul a denizen of the world of spirits'.<sup>9</sup>

This responsible moral sense was a 'primary law of thought, which needs no proof and requires no comment'. It was embodied in the 'pronouns of every language' and reflected in our desires, memories and hopes.<sup>10</sup> There was, therefore, no reason for moral laws to be on a lower footing or less demonstrable than geometrical laws - both rested on the 'instincts and intuition of sense and of conscience'.<sup>11</sup>

The analogy extends further: geometric forms are conceived as expressions of general relations which the mind apprehends in external objects, forms which are fixed and unchanging, even though the physical dimensions of the objects vary, 'and which the thoughts invest with a subjective or ideal unity'.<sup>12</sup> Ethical knowledge is of the same kind - standards of right and wrong are conceived to exist, in spite of the diversity of human life and emotion, with the same certainty and clarity as the abstract forms of the triangle and circle.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Birks, T. R., *Mathematical and Moral Certainty*, p. 301.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 308.

Birks felt that the analogical argument provided a means to overcome a major difficulty found in the writings of some recent writers, like Ralph Wardlaw and Thomas Brown, who had tried to counter utilitarian ethics by arguing that moral principles were the direct decrees of God.<sup>14</sup> Birks contended that if our moral principles and feelings were 'purely of positive Divine appointment, which the same hand that implants them may change or reverse', then they could possess no intrinsic moral virtue, being only attributes of divine power.<sup>15</sup> There could, in other words, be no moral virtue in obeying the laws of an arbitrary divine sovereign who claimed obedience on the sole ground of his power.

According to Birks's analogy, geometrical laws are universal, while the world they describe and the mind that perceives them can only be regarded 'as the objects of an all-including intuition, but not as the objects of arbitrary power'. Equally, with regard to the universality of moral laws - it was as difficult for us to conceive that treachery would become a virtue and compassion a crime as to imagine the laws of space being inverted or the properties of a circle varying. This was because of our deep rooted intuition that 'good and evil are anterior to choice' and that moral law precedes rather than determines individual choice.<sup>16</sup>

Birks's tutor Whewell praised the essay and distributed copies among friends, finding that his opinion of its merit was shared by Dean Conybeare, J. C. Hare and Sir William Hamilton. Whewell affirmed that the 'philosophy was most profound and consistent, and the views of the nature of morality of the pure and elevated kind'.<sup>17</sup> Birks's argument appears to have exercised a continuing

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<sup>14</sup>Schneewind, J. B., *op. cit.*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>15</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Analogy of Mathematical and Moral Certainty* (1834, reprinted in *First Principles of Moral Science* London, 1873), p. 310.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>17</sup>Whewell, W., Letter to J. C. Hare, 25 December 1833 quoted in Todhunter, I., *William Whewell, D. D., Master of Trinity College Cambridge, An Account of his writings, with selections from his literary and scientific correspondence* (London, 1876), vol. II, p. 175.



influence upon Whewell, who was elected to the Knightbridge Chair in Moral Philosophy in 1838. Whewell took up the attack on the utilitarian school based on the contention that intuitive moral ideas could, like the sciences, could be studies as 'bodies of exact, systematic, progressive knowledge'.<sup>18</sup> The analogical argument also formed the starting point of Whewell's *Elements of Morality Including Polity* (1845), which followed Birks in attempting to justify the existence of a system of 'Moral Truths, definitely expressed, and arranged according to their rational connection'.<sup>19</sup>

### Philosophy of Science

Whewell's ethical philosophy, in which morality was a deductive system analogous to geometry, has been interpreted as bearing a close relation to his philosophy of science.<sup>20</sup> This was also based on the contention that 'Fundamental Ideas', or what the activity of mind contributed to knowing, were the means to interpreting factual observations.<sup>21</sup> Scientific observation allowed scientists to assess the adequacy of their 'Fundamental Ideas', and, as their 'Ideas' were refined in the light of observation, they became better placed to seek out new facts.<sup>22</sup>

Whewell published his *History of the Inductive Sciences* in 1837 and *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, Founded upon Their History* in 1840 and

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<sup>18</sup>Whewell, W., Lecture on Moral Philosophy (1841), Trinity College Cambridge, Whewell Papers, Add. Ms. R. 6. 16., p. 37.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Yeo, R., 'William Whewell's Philosophy of Knowledge and its Reception' in Fisch and Schaffer, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup>Donagan, A., 'Whewell's *Elements of Morality*', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Nov. 1974, p. 724 and Yeo, R., 'William Whewell, Natural Theology and the Philosophy of Science in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain', *Annals of Science*, vol. 36, 1979, p. 499 and p. 501.

<sup>21</sup>Preyer, R. O., 'The Romantic Tide Reaches Trinity: Notes on the Transmission of New Approaches to Traditional Studies at Cambridge, 1820-1840', in Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.), *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981), p. 50.

<sup>22</sup>Donagan, A., *op. cit.*, p. 725.

the fact that these publications were contemporaneous with his major works on ethics raises the question of whether Birks may have helped to stimulate Whewell's adoption of a Kantian philosophy of science. Although Whewell had adopted and developed Birks's ethical philosophy, Birks's brief references to his own philosophy of science, contained in his published output during the 1830s, provide insufficient evidence to establish a direct influence in this area.

Birks did himself interpret scientific progress in Kantian terms, describing Newtonian astronomy, for example, as the triumph of 'law over experience, and reason over the illusions of sense'.<sup>23</sup> Every 'stream' of intellectual advance, he argued, was based on 'some higher principle'. These principles formed the 'root of science - the postulates with which all reasoning begins, and without which, indeed, a single step cannot be taken'.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Whewell had studied Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in its original language.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Birks's line of argument in the *Analogy* may have helped Whewell to come to the conclusion that 'Fundamental Ideas' were central to the interpretation of facts in every branch of human knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

### The Problem of Evil

By the 1850s, the predominance of clerical philosophers was beginning to be challenged by a generation of writers, including George Eliot, J. A. Froude and Francis Newman, who openly criticized the morality of traditional Christian dogma. For these authors the cruelty present in nature and the continued presence

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<sup>23</sup>Birks, T. R., *Mathematical and Moral Certainty*, p. 300.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>25</sup>Preyer, R. O., *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup>Birks did provide a more detailed account of his own Kantian approach at a later date, in a lecture discussed in chapter 11.

of moral evil among mankind raised doubts about divine providence. Moreover, Christian apologetics which sought to explain the continuance of evil with reference to the Scripture doctrine of the future eternal punishment of the wicked raised further ethical questions concerning the nature of divine benevolence.<sup>27</sup>

Birks responded to these debates with *The Difficulties of Belief* (1855), which he did not intend to be an attempt to convert sceptical unbelievers, but as 'so much more aimed' at the 'difficulties of thoughtful Christians'. He felt the book was particularly suited to 'young students of thoughtful minds & religious training, but who have felt perturbed by some of the darker aspects of revealed religion'.<sup>28</sup>

Birks contended that moral evil had not been either positively created by God or permitted to develop by his failure to act against it. It was the 'inseparable result of the creation of free moral agents'.<sup>29</sup> Freedom had to involve the possibility to choose wrong-doing. This form of argument inevitably raised the questions of how far man could be free given his created nature and how far environmental circumstances determined his actions. If moral choices were determined by pre-existing circumstances then our understanding of the power of choice diminished until everything seemed inevitably determined by a long chain of causes stretching back to the first creation at the beginning of time.

Birks made much of the analogy between human and divine attributes - the being of God was infinitely necessary and yet his will was infinitely free - he could not deny himself his own existence, but did all things according to his own will. In the same way man had been created as a free agent, but also in the image

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<sup>27</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Warfare of Conscience with Theology' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. iv; *Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 150-169.

<sup>28</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to a representative of Macmillan & Co., 6 July 1855, Reading University Library, MS. 1089, 224/79.

<sup>29</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall* (Cambridge, 1855), p. 50.

of God and so his will was neither undetermined, as causeless events were an impossibility, or entirely constrained by outward circumstances. His will was 'strictly self-determined'.<sup>30</sup> Man enjoyed a real liberty, but not of pure indifference or of acting without motive because it was the 'self' which 'decides the weight of the motives themselves, and the practical result of the circumstances out of which they arise'.<sup>31</sup>

As men were created free agents, it followed that divine action could only be in accordance with that nature and forcible constraint of men's actions would be 'as inapplicable as reasonings with a stone'. Both reason and Scripture affirmed that - 'persuasion, command, entreaty, threatening and promise, are the only legitimate and possible modes of divine government'.<sup>32</sup> Repentance from sin was 'no piece of celestial mechanism' but a great 'moral change' and moral agents could only be ruled by 'moral influence'.<sup>33</sup>

Hence the created nature of man brought the danger of choosing evil but also involved the inherent possibility of redemption. Divine foresight and wisdom ensured that 'where sin hath abounded, grace will much more abound, and death shall at last be swallowed up in a glorious victory'.<sup>34</sup>

### Science and Revelation

The prevailing scientific paradigm in the early nineteenth century was a providential approach. Scientific activity involved seeking evidence of God's design and purposive control in nature. This interpretative framework was

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60-1.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

increasingly being tested by data that was difficult to accommodate within the conventional conception of the natural world.

Consequently the Paleyan static view of nature was being superseded by the doctrine of progressive creation. This theory interpreted the fossil record as revealing the work of a benign God disclosing progressively more of his power in each new, successive, creation. It also appeared to offer new and specific evidence for the recent creation of man and the historical reality of the Noachic Deluge - the Flood was especially important as it linked Scriptural texts with scientific conceptions of violent cataclysms which transcended the forces of nature apparently at work now. The Flood was the latest of these great 'catastrophes' which proved that nature must have been, at times, supernatural.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1830s 'development' theories were also beginning to be promoted. These were based on the view that God's provision for the laws of nature was immutable and science proved their divine origin by demonstrating the self-sufficiency and regularity of their operation, rather than searching for evidence of exceptional miraculous interventions. Lyell maintained that 'all former changes of the organic and inorganic creation are referable to one uninterrupted succession of physical events, governed by the laws now in operation'.<sup>36</sup>

Catastrophism continued to be the prevailing orthodoxy, with Buckland and Sedgwick holding the chairs of geology at Oxford and Cambridge, although Lyell's researches had forced them to abandon the idea of a universal flood as a primary and all-embracing geological force.<sup>37</sup> In reviewing the anonymously published *Vestiges of Creation* (1844), which had promoted a form of biological

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<sup>35</sup>Gillispie, C. C., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 140.

evolution by progressive natural law, Sedgwick and Whewell continued to emphasize the unbridgeable gaps between species and organic orders, corresponding with gaps in geological eras.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, the concept of progress was being assimilated into the contemporary religious world view. Birks stated that although the Bible failed to mention the prehistoric geological eras, new discoveries were now beginning to throw 'fresh light upon its statements of the order of Providence; and reveal to us, with clearer beauty the gradual ascent from a physical to a moral, and from a moral to a spiritual universe'. He inferred that the 'same relation which Adam sustained to the fierce monsters of an extinct creation, the Prince of Peace will sustain' to the 'ambitious warriors, who have filled our earth with confusion and carnage for long ages, when He shall reign in the promised kingdom of righteousness and rejoice with his people in the sight of a ransomed universe'.<sup>39</sup>

### A Plurality of Worlds

Brooke has argued that conventional natural theology was in disarray well before the publication of Darwin's *Origin* (1859) as Christian thinkers found difficulties in finding adaptive design in the whole of creation. Yet to exclude the immensity of geological time or vastness of the known universe would have involved admitting waste on a cosmic scale and failures in the mechanism of Creation.<sup>40</sup>

The possibility of a plurality of inhabited worlds had often been brought into natural theology but Whewell, in an anonymously published astronomical

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy, being an inquiry into the Scripture testimony respecting the "good things to come"* (London, 1854), p. 9.

<sup>40</sup>Brooke, J. H., 'Natural Theology and the Plurality of Worlds: Observations on the Brewster-Whewell Debate', *Annals of Science*, 34, 1977, pp. 221-286.

tract, attacked excessively bold claims about the divine, seeking to focus natural religion on man. The whole universe, he maintained, must have been provided for man's intellectual edification, by tracing how God's laws operated in such a vast and complex cosmos.<sup>41</sup>

Yet Whewell's argument proved to be most controversial among religious scientists and writers who felt that the deliberate creation of numerous uninhabited worlds contradicted the Biblical account of purposeful design in creation. David Brewster, the most eminent of Scottish Evangelical scientists and renowned for his work in optics, accused Whewell of having eliminated any sense of divine intention from the universe.<sup>42</sup>

Birks's *Modern Astronomy* (1850) had been published just before Whewell's tract although it appears to have attracted little attention. Whewell had informed Birks that his line of argument had not been directly stimulated by Birks's ideas and Birks replied that he had read Whewell's text 'with very great interest' and was satisfied to find that their 'thoughts have run so much in parallel lines'.<sup>43</sup> Birks had also aimed to demonstrate the continued harmony between science and religion. With regard to the plurality of worlds question, Birks focused on its main theological implication - the issue of how Christ's redemption could be reconciled with the apparent insignificance of the planet earth in the known universe.

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<sup>41</sup>Ruse, M., 'The Relationship between Science and Religion in Britain, 1830-1870', *Church History*, no. 44, 1975, p. 517-518.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 518.

<sup>43</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. Whewell, 5 May 1854 (bound with Trinity College library copy of Birks's *Modern Astronomy*). This document is the only letter between Birks and Whewell in the Trinity collection of Whewell papers, however it seems likely that Birks would have continued to maintain personal contact with his former tutor during the period of his fellowship at Trinity. It is also evident from this document that Birks and Whewell did correspond with each other after Birks had settled at Kelshall, sending each other copies of their latest publications.

Birks recognized that the existence of a plurality of inhabited planets would seem to be a reasonable inference from the 'moral presumption ... that God has made nothing in vain'. Yet a unique importance for the earth would follow the Scriptural precedent. The insignificant town of Bethlehem had, after all, been chosen to reveal the mystery of divine love to all sinners.<sup>44</sup> The possibility of extra-terrestrial life did not necessarily undermine the Scriptural doctrine of the fall because the earth might not be the only fallen world. If even the angels had fallen, he argued, then what other conceivable race might not also have fallen.

If other races did exist, and had received divine revelations offering them redemption, this also raised doubts concerning the unique importance of Christ's earthly incarnation.<sup>45</sup> Given the weight of Scriptural testimony to the importance of this event, Birks felt that the concept of a plurality of inhabited worlds had to be called into question - there was, after all, no direct evidence that the vast number of stars were all surrounded by planets, let alone inhabitable ones - in fact, he affirmed, geological observations had clearly demonstrated man's late appearance on earth and so the balance of probability was that other worlds, if they existed at all, remained uninhabited.<sup>46</sup> A vast, barren universe was, Birks maintained, no more difficult to reconcile with divine providence than the multitude of organisms which were only visible through a microscope and which, like the heavens, gave rise to 'delightful contemplation' of the works of the Almighty.<sup>47</sup>

Birks maintained that the vastness of the universe, and apparent insignificance of the earth, actually enhanced the importance of the incarnation. It ensured that the greatness and condescension of divine love, revealed in the

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<sup>44</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Astronomy* (London, 1850), pp. 61-62.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.



Gospel, could now be adored with even greater reverence - just as Christ had been born in poverty in the obscure town of Bethlehem, so the 'discoveries of science merely carry one step further the truth already revealed'.<sup>48</sup>

Birks even conjectured that 'when the work of redemption is complete, a celestial emigration may begin from our little planet ... It may be, that as fresh planets are prepared ... to receive a race of inhabitants, unborn patriarchs may be sent forth, like Noah, to people its desolate heritage'.<sup>49</sup>

#### Scripture: the 'evidences' of Christianity

Birks rejected the essential premise of the anti-supernaturalist Tübingen school - that the Bible could not be seen as a historical record of miraculous events. Assertions concerning the impossibility of miracles were, he believed, a 'presumptuous folly' as 'From the fact that God has richly displayed His wisdom in the universe, as the Great Architect and Mechanician', they would infer 'that He can never manifest his nobler attributes, as the Father of mercies, and the Supreme moral Governor of all reasonable beings'.<sup>50</sup>

If the internal 'evidences' of the Gospel, the miraculous attestations bearing witness to its truth, were false 'then must the Gospel be a fraud or a dream, and all the philosophical theories of the Incarnation and Atonement must pass away with it into the land of shadows'. If they were true, 'we are clearly bound to receive the whole message, which God has thus attested in the sight of the world'.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Treasures of Wisdom: or, Thoughts on the connection between natural science and revealed truth* (London, 1855), p. 33.

<sup>49</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Astronomy* (London, 1850), p. 63.

<sup>50</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Rationalism, and the Inspiration of the Scriptures. Two lectures* (London, 1853), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

In *Horae Evangelicae* (1852), Birks sought to refute the assumptions made by writers, like Strauss, who had adopted a mythical interpretation of the Gospels. These writers had emphasized the variations of factual detail in the Gospel narratives and the late period of their composition, after the fall of Jerusalem or the close of the first century, allowing for the accumulation of legends and exaggeration. Birks set out to argue, as Paley had done in discussing the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles, that the historical authenticity of the Gospel accounts could be established from internal textual evidence.

He began by considering the mutual relations of the four texts to each other. Although the first two gospels showed some variation in the sequence of events, they agreed in their main elements. The amount of correlation between them, in both points of detail and phraseology in groups of successive verses, was sufficient to prove that they were not composed independently from a common oral tradition, as Strauss had maintained. Yet the divergences in chronological detail that did exist were too numerous for the alternative hypothesis of them being derived from a single earlier document used by both authors. Hence, Birks maintained, Mark had used the earlier account but varied and elaborated it using independent information available to him.<sup>52</sup>

He went on to argue that Luke had been written later and that it drew material from the first two Gospels, together with more original information. While John's Gospel was different in character from its predecessors, it contained a 'series of undesigned and exact coincidences' which added to the force of the combined evidence of the others.<sup>53</sup> The first three Gospels hinted at Jesus's ministry outside Galilee, while the fourth almost exclusively recorded the

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<sup>52</sup>Birks, T. R., *Horae Evangelicae; or, the internal evidence of the gospel history. Being an inquiry into the structure and origin of the four gospels, their historical consistency, and the characteristic design of each narrative* (London, 1852), pp. 9-29.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

ministry in Judea and Jerusalem, precisely filling in the chronological gaps in the other narratives. The further details which John's text gave concerning events recorded in the earlier Gospels, including the Resurrection, also seemed to correlate with certain allusions in the other texts.<sup>54</sup>

Birks was also concerned to defend the traditional argument that the early composition of the Gospel texts added weight to their historical credibility. His starting point was to consider the Book of Acts, which was addressed to the same person as Luke's Gospel (Theophilus) and, Birks claimed, was clearly written by the same author. As Acts referred directly to Luke's Gospel that must have predated Acts and, from a comparison of the first three Gospels and details in Acts and the Epistles, Birks concluded that the first Gospel was written c. 42 A. D., the second c. 48-50 A. D. and the third c. 52 A. D.<sup>55</sup>

Strauss had also stressed the variations in the Gospel accounts of miracles, including the Resurrection, claiming that the differing accounts were irreconcilable and were typical of the embellishments usually found in stories of a legendary character. Birks, by contrast, contended that the principle of what he described as Reconcilable Variation could help to establish the authenticity of Scriptural miracles. He pointed to an underlying unity shared by the Gospel narratives and believed that the degree of diversity between them was wide enough to discount the possibility of them being ignorant or fraudulent copies of each other, but narrow enough to be reconcilable when allowances were made for the distinct purposes of the individual authors and the resulting character of their works.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 219-258.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 269-271.

Birks argued that the historical sequence of the events of the Resurrection was clear, if the four accounts were taken together. While the individual narratives did differ in particular details, the differences reflected the date, circumstances of composition and purpose of each text, adding to their historical credibility. St. Matthew, writing in Palestine 12-14 years after the Resurrection when eye-witnesses to the event would have still been alive, had no need to list all Christ's post-mortem appearances. He provided a selection that gave the strongest evidence of the Resurrection and which had particular reference to meeting the objections of sceptical Jews, such as an appearance witnessed by five hundred disciples, and to demonstrate that previous prophecies had been fulfilled.<sup>57</sup>

St. Mark, according to Birks, wrote later, when the immediate debates had passed. This allowed him to be able also to record Christ's appearances at Jerusalem. Luke and John supplemented other areas briefly treated in Mark's narrative, which, Birks believed, continued a pattern of elaboration - once the earliest texts had recorded the most striking oral evidence, more detail needed to be added by later authors to make the history more convincing to a wider circle of readers.

With regard to the Scriptural miracles themselves, Birks suggested that they had to meet a double test to be credible - the written testimony of their occurrence had to be as sufficient and decisive as would be expected of a true record of any natural historical event and the message, to which miracles attested, had to commend itself to the conscience. Birks believed that they did meet these criteria; even sceptical critics did all they could to retain the morality of the Gospels, while discarding supernatural elements in them, and there was

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<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 449-450.

more evidence for Scriptural miracles than for much that had been accepted in recorded ancient history.<sup>58</sup>

The miracles also fulfilled their professed purpose as evidence of a divine revelation. The resurrection of a dead man to life, which Strauss had dismissed as self-contradictory, was a miracle if judged by the standards of ordinary human experience but, seen in another light, it was a manifestation of divine power that was constantly supreme over natural law and triumphant over the omnipotence of death. Hence such a miracle was perfectly suited to overcome the hindrances to a knowledge of the dominion of God.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the miracles of Jesus's ministry were not arbitrary or lawless; they transcended physical laws but conformed to a nobler law of divine goodness. Their leading character was mercy and compassion, reflecting the consistent moral harmony of the Gospel message.<sup>60</sup>

#### Scripture: criticism and inspiration

In the early decades of the nineteenth century Evangelicals, influenced by Enlightenment thought, were far from being simply antagonistic to new thinking, rejecting rigorously systematic approaches to the Bible and largely accepting the relevance of scholarship. In keeping with the Enlightenment emphasis upon free enquiry, the Evangelicals of Simeon's generation held a variety of views on the inspiration of Scripture. They were committed to the empirical study of Biblical texts, believing that man's reason was capable of distinguishing between historical or scientific errors in particular passages and the truth of the inspired ideas they contained.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 466-468.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 468-469.

<sup>61</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 86-87.

Yet, as early as the 1820s, the publication of the Baptist Robert Haldane's precise and detailed defence of verbal inspiration, and the debates conducted in Evangelical periodicals over the Apocrypha, already represented attempts to defend and promote a more rigid and precisely defined attitude to the Bible. Bebbington has interpreted Haldane's approach as a manifestation of Romantic influences; a growing belief that parts of Scripture could not be accepted or rejected on the grounds of human reason and a perception that the entire Bible had to be accepted in simple, reverent, faith.<sup>62</sup>

Birks rejected dogmatic statements of inerrancy, on the grounds that we should continue to enquire into the mode of inspiration, and articulated a careful defence of the more conventional view of plenary inspiration. He believed that his view of inspiration was 'at an equal distance' from the 'laxity' of the Coleridgean view, that what finds a response in our conscience must have proceeded from the Holy Spirit but the rest could be discarded, 'and from the insuperable perplexities and contradictions which would result from the hypothesis of a mere mechanical dictation, in which the sacred writers are mere automatons'.<sup>63</sup>

Birks's starting point was St. Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians describing different varieties of inspiration - knowledge, prophecy and doctrine. He took this to mean that 'Immediate revelation' or 'spiritual discernment in its highest exercise' will be the method by which the 'substance' of divine messages is given, 'and prophesying or teaching, the two ways in which it is imparted to the church'. The prophet conveys 'a direct revelation; the teacher unfolds the results of spiritual wisdom; but both varieties, whether in the reception or the

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<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>63</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Rationalism, and the Inspiration of the Scriptures. Two lectures* (London, 1853), p. 97.

communication of the truth, are here ascribed to the special operation of the Spirit of God'.<sup>64</sup>

Direct dictation was a mode of revelation more commonly used in the Old Testament - mainly in the oral delivery of prophetic visions.<sup>65</sup> The second mode of inspiration was a type of direct revelation 'where the substance of the message is supernaturally given, but there is no distinct trace of dictation in the words by which it is conveyed'. In the Book of Revelation, for instance, direct dictation was confined to the seven Epistles to the Churches, while the substance of the rest was 'supernaturally revealed in a series of visions'.<sup>66</sup> Further examples included the account of Creation in Genesis and visions of Daniel. This form of direct revelation by vision was also more frequent in the Old Testament 'since the standard of prophetic illumination was lower than with the Apostles and Evangelists'.<sup>67</sup>

The third method by which divine knowledge was revealed involved 'truth' being 'conveyed by the faculties of memory and reason, purified and elevated by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>68</sup> This was to be found in the Epistles and in the historical books of both the Old and New Testaments. For this method, as well as studying the internal evidence of the texts themselves, there was also the explicit warrant of Scripture as Paul had himself described this process in the Epistles referring to 'a spiritual inspiration within the mind of the prophet'.<sup>69</sup>

This still left modern readers with the problem that it was difficult to determine, on *a priori* grounds, if 'the exclusion of all error, in detail, must be

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<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109.

one feature of a Divine message'.<sup>70</sup> Birks maintained that 'these writers, directly or indirectly, do advance a claim to inspiration; and that it is doubly ratified by miraculous attestations of their character as Divine messengers, and by the clearest signs of moral earnestness and deep sincerity'.<sup>71</sup>

Yet whether these writings 'were free from the least manual error' was 'happily not essential to the practical maintenance of a plenary inspiration'.<sup>72</sup> If St. Matthew had, as appeared to be the case, ascribed, from a lapse of memory, to Jeremiah a prediction

which really belongs to Zechariah, the admission of such an oversight needs involve no hazard to the faith of Christians, and does not sensibly affect, for any practical purpose, the doctrine of plenary inspiration; because a simple reference to the Old Testament canon serves to rectify the error. But if we hold that the prophecy itself was misapplied, we undermine altogether his Apostolic authority, as an inspired messenger of God, and launch on a sea of uncertainties, where neither chart nor compass can be found.<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

Birks's intellectual interests reveal an outlook that combined an Enlightenment emphasis upon order, purpose and law with newer Romantic influences. His *Analogy*, affirming that intuitive moral laws were the basis of ethical judgements rather than social utility, embodies this mentality.

Unlike the Irvingites, Birks did not abandon natural and evidential theology in favour of a simple trust in revelation and he continued to focus a good deal of his attention on both subjects during the 1850s. The influence of Enlightenment patterns of thought is also reflected in his rationalistic defence of the supernatural and its place in scripture.

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 167.



Birke's *Analogy* was an original and important contribution to the development of philosophy at Cambridge. Whewell's adoption and elaboration of Birke's arguments proved to be central to mid-nineteenth-century ethical debates, offering the main Christian alternative to the refined utilitarianism advocated by J. S. Mill. The prominent mathematical physicist G. G. Stokes, for instance, continued to defend this approach in the 1890s in his Gifford lectures on natural theology, comparing the 'first principles of right and wrong' to geometrical axioms and insisting that the mental faculties involved in moral philosophy were 'natural powers of the mind' like those used in geometry and the physical sciences.<sup>74</sup>

Birke's *Analogy* and *Modern Astronomy* also demonstrate the centrality of science to his world view. This world view, it has been argued, was characteristic of a 'network' of Cambridge wranglers who went on to take up posts in the church and universities.<sup>75</sup> The central element in the outlook of this group was a profound religious commitment as the basis of a 'truth complex'. Scientists who were former wranglers, like the astronomer Pritchard and the physicists Stokes, Thomson and Maxwell, 'perceived science as the path to truth, and truth as the path to religious belief'.<sup>76</sup> Birke contended that moral truths were as certain as the laws of geometry and he believed, as did Whewell, that the Genesis account of the recent and unique creation of man had to be reconciled with the scientific observation of the universe.

Birke was engaging with the works of Continental criticism well before the implications of the new scholarship had been fully appreciated by many in the

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<sup>74</sup>Wilson, D. B., 'A Physicist's Alternative to Materialism: the religious thought of George Gabriel Stokes', *Victorian Studies*, 28, 1984, p. 78.

<sup>75</sup>Becher, H. W., 'The Social Origins and Post-graduate Careers of a Cambridge Intellectual Elite, 1830-1860', *Victorian Studies*, 28, 1984, pp. 97-127.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 115.

religious world. His defence of orthodox beliefs involved a process of rationalistic historical demonstration that consciously followed and developed the approach of leading eighteenth-century divines like Paley.

The combination of Enlightenment and Romantic influences upon Birks's thought will be discussed further in the subsequent analysis of his contributions to the religious and scientific debates of the 1860s in Part Two of this thesis. Birks's emphasis, in the philosophical publications examined in this chapter, upon individual freewill and man's capacity for discerning moral truth will also be seen to be reflected in his interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement.

Birks also continued to develop his philosophical and scientific interests and his involvement with contemporary intellectual debates is in marked contrast to the conventional stereotyped depiction of nineteenth-century Evangelical adventists as ill-informed fanatics.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, Birks regarded 'catastrophist' geology and modern astronomy in a clearly defined adventist and Biblical perspective. He increasingly felt, for example, that the notion of post-millennial ages of salvation, derived from his interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, was necessary to explain the presence of a vast, unpopulated universe. He wrote to Whewell that he was 'more disposed to ingraft on the facts of science the possibility, or even probability, of a future inhabitation' of those other worlds in a 'colonization, on a larger scale than our American & Australian colonies'.<sup>78</sup> He believed that the 'Scriptures do not affirm, but oppose, the future exhaustion of the race of mankind' and felt that the earth could not 'have been wondrously

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<sup>77</sup>The rhetorical excesses of some popular adventist preachers were attacked in G. Eliot's 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming', *Westminster Review*, 8, Oct. 1855.

<sup>78</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to W. Whewell, 5 May 1854 (bound with Trinity College library copy of Birks's *Modern Astronomy*).

prepared, through long ages, to be inhabited by its chief inhabitants for a few thousand years only'.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, Birks's anti-Roman Catholicism, pan-Evangelical and political opinions had also been shaped by his premillennialist views. Birks 'saw nothing, even in the lesser details of passing events' that was unconnected 'with a mighty purpose and prospect'.<sup>80</sup> He had thus felt unable to compromise with the more pragmatic stance towards national religion adopted by Gladstone from 1845 or with state support of Roman Catholic institutions.

Birks's belief in a divinely ordained hierarchical social order was paralleled by his descriptions of the heavenly reunion of believers.<sup>81</sup> Preaching to his rural parishioners at Watton he declared that, although believers were all to be united in mutual communion, in heaven, as in their own congregation, each of them would also have 'his own rank and place in the communion of the redeemed'.<sup>82</sup> Scriptural testimony to the fact that different gifts of grace and degrees of personal holiness were to reap commensurate rewards ensured that just as 'in an earthly kingdom there are manifold varieties of trade, of rank, and of talent, so has the Lord purposed in the work of redemption'.<sup>83</sup>

While Birks's strident political conservatism and anti-Roman Catholic polemic accord with Hilton's characterization of the 'extremism' of 'Recordite' Evangelicals, a wider consideration of Birks's outlook demonstrates that the premillennial adventism of the Anglican Churchmen of Birks's generation had rapidly developed its own character, distinct from the 'extreme' Irvingism that had been largely discredited by the mid-1830s.

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<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

<sup>81</sup>See Appendix I.

<sup>82</sup>Birks, T. R., *Farewell Sermons. Preached in the parish church of Watton, Herts.* (London, 1883), p. 103.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

Birks and Bickersteth spurned the fatalism of the Irvingites. They were both committed to missionary causes and to pan-Evangelical co-operation with a devotional zeal that was closely related to their personal advent hopes. Moreover, Birks's defence of plenary inspiration is in stark contrast to the narrow literalism that had rapidly been adopted by the Albury circle and other radical millennialists.<sup>84</sup>

Birks's prophetic studies had also led him to reject a conception of the future life which he felt was common in popular Christianity. Birks's views on this subject contain features usually associated with the 'softening of Evangelical Christianity' from the middle years of the nineteenth century,<sup>85</sup> yet they had been formulated more than twenty years earlier and stemmed directly from the adventist revival of the 1820s and 1830s.

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<sup>84</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>85</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), p. 273.

Part Two: 1860 - 1883

## CHAPTER VII

### **Evangelicals and the 'crisis of faith'**

The decades of the 1860s and 1870s have often been regarded as marking a decisive turning point in nineteenth-century church history.<sup>1</sup> The constitutional position and doctrinal orthodoxy of the established church were challenged by Privy Council adjudications in major theological controversies and by Irish disestablishment (1869). Scientific and scholarly publications also appeared to be undermining the intellectual authority of orthodox dogma and traditional assumptions concerning the character and purposes of God as manifested in Creation and Scripture.

Amongst Evangelical clergymen anxieties were further heightened by eschatological expectations and fears for the Protestant character of the Church of England. These decades saw the organized opposition to ritualism reaching its peak, as well as its ultimate failure as the Public Worship Regulation Act (1874) proved to be unenforceable in practice. Within Evangelicalism itself, theological

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. Chadwick, O., *The Victorian Church* vol. II (London, 1972).

controversy was becoming more intense as the beginnings of the split between 'liberal' and 'conservative' positions began to appear.

Recent historiography, however, while still recognizing the intensity and significance of mid-nineteenth century controversies, has tended to emphasize longer-term influences towards change, influences that predated the 1860s and continued to be of importance in later years, most notably Romantic spirituality and incarnational theology.

This chapter introduces Birks's later career and discusses it in relation to both these perspectives. It reviews the relevant historical literature and the topics to be analysed in greater detail in chapters 8 - 11.

### The 'Crisis of Faith'

The mid-Victorian crisis of belief differed from earlier comparable crises in both tone and substance. While some eighteenth-century philosophers and radicals had questioned theoretical arguments for the existence of God, even the most daring thinkers, like David Hume, did not openly attack Christianity or the Bible. By the mid-nineteenth century, the inspiration and authority of Scripture and the supernatural character of Christianity itself were at centre of educated debate, with popular writers like Spencer assuming the falsehood of theism.

Moreover, nineteenth-century debates were also unprecedented in the extent to which they implicated not just the religious intelligentsia but also the ordinary church-going population, whose faith was especially troubled by the fact that prominent religious leaders were among those critics seen to be undermining traditional doctrinal assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Gilbert, A. D., *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London, 1976), p. 176. Clerics like Benjamin Jowett felt that the credibility of Christianity could only be retained if it was adapted to modern discoveries. Jowett observed, for instance, that 'The truth seems to be, not that Christianity has lost its power, but that we are seeking to propagate Christianity under

The publication of *Essays and Reviews* (1860), in particular, seemed to be a direct challenge, from within the ranks of the Church, to the traditional understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. It provoked a bitter polemical controversy, which dominated the editorial and correspondence columns of the religious press, and gave rise to dozens of petitions to bishops and archbishops.

Retrospectively, the debates over *Essays and Reviews* have been widely regarded as a 'turning point in the history of theological opinion in England'.<sup>3</sup> They demonstrated that continental Biblical scholarship had begun to gain intellectual respectability within the Church of England and also reflected the extent of the mid-nineteenth-century reaction against the harsh eschatology of popular Evangelical Protestantism.

The moral temper of the age called into question the character of a loving God who demanded the vicarious suffering of an innocent victim to atone for the sins of others and could sentence men to eternal punishment. F. D. Maurice (1805 - 1872) had been dismissed from his chair at King's College, London (1854), for claiming that hell was a metaphorical concept and Wilson's contribution to *Essays and Reviews* also challenged the eternity of damnation.

Darwin's *Origin* (1859) was the focus for a contemporaneous confrontation between the religious and scientific world views. Darwinism intensified the mid-century crisis of faith by posing the fundamental question of whether a beneficent creator could exist at all given the struggle and waste of evolution. It thus provoked a crisis of confidence in natural theology and in the

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circumstances which, during the eighteen centuries of its existence, it has never yet encountered'; Jowett, B., *The Epistles of St. Paul* (1859) quoted in Ellis, I., 'The Intellectual Challenge to "Official Religion"' in Thomas, D. A. T. (ed.), *The British, their religious beliefs and practices, 1800-1986* (London, 1988), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., *From Coleridge to Gore: A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (London, 1971), p. 321.



omnipotence and beneficence of the divine character, which the natural world and natural sciences had been previously understood to reveal. The findings of Darwin, Lyell and other scientists also had further wide-ranging implications for Evangelical doctrines concerning man, the fall, providence and Scripture.

### Birks's Later Career

The early death of Birks's wife Elizabeth, in 1856, was a severe affliction and Birks had entered a period of prolonged mourning, ceasing his literary activities for four years.<sup>4</sup> He subsequently took up his pen once more to produce, at the request of the committee of the Religious Tract Society, a response to *Essays and Reviews* entitled *The Bible and Modern Thought* (1861).

In 1864 Birks left the parish of Kelshall to live in Hampstead with his brother-in-law and former pupil Edward Henry Bickersteth. He hoped to obtain a city living in order to 'minister to intellectual hearers' and to secure more leisure time for study. His wishes were not fulfilled in this respect, though in 1866 he was appointed to the important charge of Trinity Church, Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> This was 'an appointment in which he took great pride from its traditions', as Simeon had formerly held the post.<sup>6</sup> Birks also welcomed the opportunity of once again being part of a scholarly community.<sup>7</sup>

Birks was regarded as diligent in his pastoral duties to both the university and town. He also returned to active participation in academic life, serving as an

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<sup>4</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883. Elizabeth Birks died aged 35, a week after giving birth to twin boys, one of whom also died a month later.

<sup>5</sup>'Obituary' of Birks, *The Times*, 23 July 1883. In 1863 the living of Trinity had been acquired by the Rev. A. Peache, heir to a large mercantile fortune, who appointed Birks in 1866 and his successor (in 1877). The population of Holy Trinity was recorded as 1,946 and the net income was £160 (Bullock, F. W. B., *The History of Ridley Hall Cambridge*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1941), p. 118).

<sup>6</sup>'Obituary' of Birks, *The Cambridge Independent Press*, 28 July 1883.

<sup>7</sup>While seeking accommodation in the city he dined with Professor Adam Sedgwick and William Whewell; Birks, T. R., Letter to A. C. Birks, 5 February 1866, Birks family papers.

examiner for the Theological Tripos in 1867 and 1868 and as a member of the Board of Theological Studies. He preached the Ramsden sermon in 1867 and was frequently a select preacher before the university.

Birks was made an Honorary Canon of Ely Cathedral (1871) and elected Knightbridge Professor of Moral Theology, Casuistical Divinity and Moral Philosophy on the death of F. D. Maurice (April 1872). Birks's appointment initially provoked a hostile reaction from some scholars. Henry Sidgwick, himself a disappointed candidate for the post, had initially regarded it as a 'catastrophe', 'a mark of deliberate contempt for the study of Moral Philosophy' and 'a determination to crush it under the Heel of theology'. He went on to acknowledge, however, that 'it turned out on inquiry that the electors had really intended to choose, and believed that they were choosing, the Best Philosopher' and his 'indignation evaporated'.<sup>8</sup>

Birks was also involved in specifically Evangelical initiatives in education. He had been a founder member of the Church of England Education Society, which had separated from the National Society in order to promote more vigorous Protestant principles<sup>9</sup> and was among the group of Evangelical clergy who, following the opening of Keble College, Oxford (1870), raised the funds to buy premises and establish Wycliffe Hall (1877).<sup>10</sup> One of the initial meetings of Evangelicals supporting the idea of a theological hall for Cambridge

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<sup>8</sup>Sidgwick, H., letter to Mrs. Clough, 25 May 1872, quoted in Sidgwick, A. S. and E. M., *Henry Sidgwick. A Memoir* (London, 1906), p. 265. Writing to F. Myers, Sidgwick also stated that the 'election' was 'not as bad as it looks' as Birks was 'a man of force and acumen', and had 'written books that show these qualities'; letter quoted in Sidgwick, A. S. and E. M., *op. cit.*, p. 264. Sidgwick deputized for Birks during his last illness and was elected to succeed him in the post in 1883.

<sup>9</sup>*Proceedings at the meeting on the formation of the Church of England Education Society, at Willis's Rooms, on Wednesday, May 25, 1853* (London, 1853).

<sup>10</sup>Hylson-Smith, K., *Evangelicals in the Church of England* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 183-4.

graduates was held at Birks's home, Trinity Parsonage, in 1875 and Birks went on to serve as a member of the original council of Ridley Hall.<sup>11</sup>

Birks was for five years an examining chaplain to Bishop Villiers of Carlisle.<sup>12</sup> He was also one of the few leading Evangelicals who were willing to participate in the Church Congresses of the 1860s and he spoke at the Norwich Congress (1865), sharing a platform with E. B. Pusey in a discussion on science and Scripture.

In 1866 Birks married his second wife, Georgina Douglas (née Beresford), and in the following year he published *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, which provoked a bitter controversy within the ranks of the Evangelical Alliance. Birks eventually resigned from his post as an honorary secretary of the Alliance in 1871, though he continued to be a member of the organization.<sup>13</sup>

During the Irish disestablishment debates, Birks published *Church and State* (1869), in defence of the establishment principle. He published an attempt to apply probability theory to determine the reliability of Scriptural manuscripts of differing ages.<sup>14</sup> Birks was also one of the most prominent clerical opponents of the evolutionary ideas of Darwin and Spencer.

In 1877 Birks resigned the vicarage of Trinity, suffering a stroke on the eve of his intended farewell sermon. However, he recovered sufficiently to preach twice in the spring of 1878 and he prepared an article on 'Future Punishment' for the *Contemporary Review*. He had a second seizure soon after, though he

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<sup>11</sup>Bullock, F. W. B., *The History of Ridley Hall Cambridge*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1941), pp. 112, 352.

<sup>12</sup>'Birks, Thomas Rawson', *Dictionary of National Biography* and 'Birks, Rev. Thomas Rawson', *Men of The Time* (eleventh edition).

<sup>13</sup>Birks did not take an active role in the Executive Council of the Alliance, and was rarely able to attend its meetings; Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, 14 January 1861. The minutes of the Council record that he did not attend in person during the controversy over *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, sending instead written accounts of his views; see chapter 9.

<sup>14</sup>Birks, T. R., *Essay on the right estimation of manuscript evidence in the text of the new Testament* (London, 1878).

continued to publish works dictated to his sons. A third stroke, suffered in 1880 while Birks was residing in the New Forest, prevented further intellectual effort and he was taken back to Cambridge where he was to remain until his death (19 July 1883).<sup>15</sup>

### Evangelicalism in transition

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, there was a widespread perception that Evangelical thought was undergoing significant change. Prominent Evangelicals, like the Congregationalist James Baldwin Brown (1820 - 1884), were beginning to popularize a form of Evangelicalism that had been influenced by Maurician ideas. It tended to involve a milder view of the character of God and a stress on his fatherhood, less emphasis on the sacrificial nature of Christ's atonement and a growing reluctance to discuss the eternal punishment of the wicked. Some Evangelicals, like Brown, were even moving towards advocating universal salvation.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, a body of more conservative opinion was rallying round popular preachers like the Baptist C. H. Spurgeon (1834 - 1892) and J. C. Ryle (1816 - 1900), later the first Anglican bishop of Liverpool. These Evangelicals continued to stress the substitutionary character of the atonement, promoted a traditional view of hell, and began to articulate an emotional allegiance to a narrowly defined Biblical literalism, in response to the new intellectual and theological challenges they were forced to confront during this period.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

<sup>16</sup>Parsons, G., 'From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: The Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. i; *Traditions* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 103-107.

<sup>17</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 14.

Hilton has argued that the growing divisions within Anglican Evangelicalism also owed much to eschatological differences. The 'extreme' Recordites, as they were preoccupied with miraculous providential intervention, could make no accommodation with science and liberal thought. The 'moderate' Claphamites, because of their progressive 'natural law' providential theology, were in a position to be more flexible in their attitudes towards scientific developments.<sup>18</sup>

Birks, although he held adventist views that identify him with the Recordites, had, as has been shown, a lifelong personal interest in science, especially astronomy and the physical sciences. He also carried out some experiments himself.<sup>19</sup> Many Recordites were, like Birks, members of the Victoria Institute (1865) - Lord Shaftesbury was its president and other leading premillennialists listed among its members in the 1870s were R. C. L. Bevan, A. Haldane, C. A. Heurtley, Dean Bickersteth of Lichfield and H. C. G. Moule. Their involvement in an organisation dedicated to discussing all scientific results with reference to Christian principles suggests that they, like Birks, did not see science itself, only particular evolutionary and materialist hypotheses, as threats to their religious convictions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795 - 1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 22-23.

<sup>19</sup>Birks had asked Whewell to advise him on the purchase of prisms, models and other equipment in order to investigate 'an idea' which had 'lodged some years in my mind' and 'may at least issue in a suggestive Essay on General Physics if nothing more'; Birks, T. R., Letter to W. Whewell, 5 May 1854 (bound with Trinity College library copy of Birks's *Modern Astronomy*).

<sup>20</sup>Victoria Institute, Annual Report and List of Members, 1876. Historians who have highlighted the social context of Victorian intellectual life have argued that the Victoria Institute represented a curious remnant of the tradition of clerical amateurism in British universities that had rapidly been displaced by the rise of a secular, professional scientific élite; Turner, F. M., 'The Victorian conflict between science and religion: a professional dimension' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, vol. iv; Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 83. Nonetheless, other authors have contended that 'the efforts of Victorian writers to preserve the generalist spirit of knowledge, seen against the powerful trend towards specialization, account in large part for the energy of the Victorian literary discussion of science and its cultural significance; Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T., 'Introduction' to Paradis and Postlewait (eds.), *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981).

Moreover, as chapter 3 has shown, Birks had already, from the 1840s, been developing a more moderate eschatological stance, which also appears to have influenced other Anglican adventists including his brother-in-law Edward Henry Bickersteth and Samuel Garratt. Some Anglican Evangelicals, like Samuel Minton, were even attracted towards conditionalism.<sup>21</sup>

Hence the views of the Recordites were often more varied and sophisticated than Hilton has suggested. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the majority of them stayed loyal to orthodox teaching on subjects like hell - Minton and Birks loosened ties with the Evangelical Alliance<sup>22</sup> and one of Birks's harshest critics within the Alliance was a leading premillennialist - the Scottish Free Church leader R. S. Candlish.

In his inaugural lectures at the Free Church College, Candlish accused Birks of having abandoned the essential Evangelical doctrines regarding the nature of evil, the doctrine of the fall, the nature and extent of the atonement, the nature of regenerating grace and the doctrine of eternal punishment.<sup>23</sup>

#### Long - term forces for change

Recent scholarship in the history of science has challenged the conventional 'conflict' model used to describe relations between religion and science, in which various sensational discoveries or publications like Darwin's

*Origin* each had an individual and cumulative 'impact' on religious thought.<sup>24</sup> It

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<sup>21</sup>Minton, S., *'All Things are Yours'. Closing Sermons at Eaton Chapel, with a fragment of autobiography* (London, 1874).

<sup>22</sup>Minton felt that his views were incompatible with the doctrinal basis of the Alliance and voluntarily withdrew from the organization, while Birks resigned his official post but retained his membership status.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement: a reply to Dr. Candlish's Inaugural Lecture; with a brief statement of facts in connection with the Evangelical Alliance* (London, 1870), p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Moore, J. R., *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in the United States and Great Britain, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, 1979), Livingstone, D. N., *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Edinburgh, 1987) and Brooke, J. H., *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1991).

has proved more difficult to establish a convincing and coherent alternative interpretation for a period which, scholars agree, was a century of major change in both the religious and scientific world views.

Indeed, several writers have drawn attention to the way in which the theological and scientific 'paradigms', or models of understanding, appear to have undergone contemporaneous change. Robert Young and James Moore, for instance, have suggested that the overall pattern of change involved the 'naturalisation' of man's outlook on the world. In 1800 the universe had been conceived in terms of two clearly distinguished spheres, the natural and supernatural; by 1900 naturalistic explanations had extended so far that it had become difficult, at least for many of the intellectual élite, to conceive of any other form of activity and existence.

Law - like explanations, in terms of matter, motion and force were being extended even to the bodies, minds and social lives of mankind.<sup>25</sup> Conservative theologians, like Birks, were not necessarily blindly hostile to this process. For Birks, the constant extension of the realm of natural law did not mean that 'the supernatural recedes as the laws of nature assert their supreme authority' - as physical laws could not exist alone, further study of them provided ever clearer evidence of creative design in the universe.<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between religion and science can be interpreted in terms of contrasting cultural influences, which fed into different ways of understanding and interpreting science. The Enlightenment inheritance underpinned an

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<sup>25</sup>Young, R. M., 'The impact of Darwin on conventional thought', in Symondson, A. (ed.), *The Victorian crisis of faith* (London, 1970), pp. 13-36 and Moore, J. R., 'Evangelicals and Evolution, Henry Drummond, Herbert Spencer and the Naturalization of the Spiritual World', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 38, 1985, pp. 383-417. At the same time, the rise of the new historical method in Biblical criticism also implied 'the abandonment of the customary antithesis between the natural and the supernatural'; Storr, V. F., *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century, 1800-1860* (London, 1913), p. 119.

<sup>26</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Unbelief of Pretended Science in the Last Days' in Fremantle, W. R. (ed.), *Present Times and Future Prospects* (London, 1854), p. 58.

empiricist/positivist world view, while Romanticism, which was a major influence upon both Victorian science and religion, was reflected in an idealist world view.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the major figures of early Victorian science - Faraday, Herschel, W. R. Hamilton and James Clerk Maxwell - denied the 'common sense', Enlightenment, concepts of matter and 'entertained Romantic perceptions of a pattern "far more deeply interfused", whose design and significance could not be ascertained by the application of some mechanical system'.<sup>28</sup> The influence of Romanticism was also reflected in the ambitious geological expeditions of Sedgwick and Lyell and has been traced in the character and tone of publications like Darwin's *Beagle Diary*.<sup>29</sup>

Empiricists, like Tyndall, assumed that nothing could be known except sense experiences, while idealists, like Whewell, emphasized that additional sources of knowledge were available - especially intuition, conscience and Divine revelation. Idealists, including Birks, held that man intuitively knew that moral, as well as physical, laws operated in the universe and that God was in the Word as well as the world.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, it was innately true that man was distinct from the animal creation, in possessing a soul. Moreover, it was self-evident that the billions of atoms in the known universe could not have simply created themselves and that the existence of 'laws of nature' both implied and required 'the desire of a Divine Lawgiver'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ellegård, A., *Darwin and the General Reader* (Gothenberg, 1958), p. 337.

<sup>28</sup>Preyer, R. O., 'The Romantic Tide Reaches Trinity: Notes on the Transmission of New Approaches to Traditional Studies at Cambridge, 1820-1840' in Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.), *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981), p. 56.

<sup>29</sup>Paradis, J., 'Darwin and Landscape' in Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 85-110.

<sup>30</sup>See Chapter 6.

<sup>31</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Uncertainties of Modern Physical Science' *Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, vol. X, (London, 1876), p. 9.



Bebbington has also interpreted the development of nineteenth-century Evangelical theology in relation to the process of rationalistic enquiry inherited from the Enlightenment and to the Romantic movement. The influence of Romanticism, Bebbington argues, ultimately altered the 'whole temper' of Evangelical theology, inspiring a less dogmatic and specific, more experiential faith that was a 'characteristic symptom of sub-Romantic influences'.<sup>32</sup>

From the 1850s the doctrine of the incarnation began to displace the centrality of the atonement in Evangelical thought. Less emphasis was placed upon the sacrifice on the cross while attention was focused on an apprehension of the life and work of Christ and establishing a union between believer and Redeemer, achieved through a revelation of God's compassion and not by a legal transaction removing the guilt of sinners.<sup>33</sup> This new incarnationalist emphasis was also, according to Hilton, reflected in a significant change in the temperament of Recordite Evangelicals. Their Irvingite inclination towards pessimism had, by the later nineteenth century, given way to a conviction that, despite the continuing prevalence of national sin and false religion, the 'laws' of 'moral righteousness' would ultimately 'prevail over every adverse and evil influence'.<sup>34</sup>

Birks was very much concerned to confront the moral critiques of orthodox doctrines like the atonement, which were being made by secular

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<sup>32</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism*, p. 143-6.

<sup>33</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement*, pp. 288-297. Evangelicals did not abandon their belief in the atonement, but there was a tendency to place less emphasis upon the Fall and the sacrificial nature of Christ's sacrifice and to focus attention on Christ's headship of the whole human race and to view the atonement as a manifestation of God's love.

<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., *First Principles of Moral Science* (1873), quoted in Hilton, *op. cit.*, p. 366, though Part One of this thesis has demonstrated that Birks's premillennial adventism had, even in his earlier career, combined an Irvingite fatalism regarding Divine judgements with a strong element of optimism, towards both the prospects for Evangelical efforts in this lifetime and hopes for a glorious redemption in the future.

intellectuals and Churchmen like Maurice and Jowett. Christian divines had, he believed, to accept part of the blame for the wave of contemporary criticism:

A strange notion seems almost to have been entertained, that faith was magnified, in proportion as the truths of revelation were presented in a shape repulsive to the moral instincts of thoughtful men.<sup>35</sup>

Birks was recognized, by the 1850s, as seeking to move away from the harsher, narrowly Calvinistic, aspects of Evangelical orthodoxy. Hort commented, for example, that Birks's *Difficulties of Belief* was based upon 'a strong faith in man's freedom, and the necessity of recognizing it in all theology, and a horror [sic] of attributing arbitrary and 'potter' - like conduct to God; and from such premises some rather weighty results may be worked out'.<sup>36</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a transformation in how Evangelicals perceived the structure of their theological identity and the parameters of theological debate. Those Evangelicals identified with what became known as the 'liberal' position were seen as modifying orthodoxy in order to accommodate modern culture, while 'conservatives' were regarded as mounting a backward-looking resistance to it.

This framework will be central to the analysis of Birks's career in Part Two of this thesis. The succeeding chapters address the issue of how far Birks's role in contemporary debates was purely a defensive one, representing a negative 'conservative' position, antagonistic to modern thought. Alternatively, to what extent was Birks part of the cultural and intellectual mainstream, with attitudes

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<sup>35</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall* (Cambridge, 1855), p. 101.

<sup>36</sup>Letter to Rev. J. Ellerton, January 1856, quoted in Hort, A. F., *Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort* (London, 1896), vol. I, p. 321.

and opinions that were shaped by the same influences, and were moving in the same direction, as those of his 'liberal' Anglican contemporaries like F. D.

Maurice ?

In fact, it would appear that both 'conservatives' and 'liberals' shared a common legacy of Enlightenment thought and both were increasingly under the sway of Romantic sensibilities. 'Liberal' churchmen retained the Enlightenment belief in the purposive nature of the historical process, expressed as a variety of 'development' theories explaining man's origin and linked to notions of 'progressive' revelation, together with Romantic conceptions of divine immanence and a sense of the supernatural existing in the natural order. Like many scientists, they tended to stress as an innate truth that mind, or 'conscience', proved the unbridgeable gulf with the animal kingdom and the special creation of man's soul.

'Conservatives', like Birks, retained the traditional natural theology of the Enlightenment, a belief that God, and God's Word, was implicit in the natural order and revealed by reverent study, although this was increasingly being expressed in terms of natural law rather than as special miraculous instances of creative design. Yet Birks was at the same time also part of the strong idealist strand in nineteenth-century intellectual life, which defined the character of much of contemporary scientific thought. Birks was, therefore, very much part of the complex intellectual development of Victorian Britain and his thought needs to be seen in this context, rather than in terms of a historical 'conflict' between religion and science, in order to be appreciated and understood.

Chapters 8-11 present a discussion of Birks's publications from the 1860s and 1870s, set within the context of contemporary ideological and cultural trends. They will analyse the extent to which Birks made an original and important contribution to the Evangelical tradition. Particular attention will also

be paid to the significance of Birks's eschatology in informing other aspects of his thought - including his responses to the critical, philosophical and scientific challenges to Evangelical orthodoxy.

## CHAPTER VIII

### **Disestablishment and Ritualism**

Evangelicals rejected any means of saving grace other than Scripture, preaching and the acceptance of Christ through faith. Consequently they tended to adopt low views of the sacraments and to have somewhat ambiguous attitudes concerning the authority of the Church. It was felt to be inevitable that a 'high estimate of human and ecclesiastical traditions naturally involves, as its sequel, a lowered estimate of the Scriptures, and of the Divine wisdom embodied in these messages of God'.<sup>1</sup>

Anglican Evangelicals felt that their concerns regarding questions of church order and sacramental observance, which had eased following the Gorham Judgement (1850), were taking on a new urgency as, by the late 1860s, controversial Anglo-Catholic clerics like A. H. Mackonochie and A. H. Stanton received national publicity. Moreover, as the Clerical Subscription Act (1865) also allowed a greater degree of doctrinal latitude in the interpretation of the formularies of the national Church, an Evangelical commentator felt that the Church was 'assuredly at the edge of a crisis which, unless there is unusual skill

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<sup>1</sup>Birks, T. R., *Thoughts on the Sacraments and on the Relations of Prayer and Science* (London, 1873), p. 19.

and firmness on the part of our ecclesiastical rulers, must sooner or later end in a disruption of some kind'.<sup>2</sup>

The continued influence of premillennial adventism added further vigour to Evangelical campaigns against the spread of ritualism within the Church of England. It also underpinned the strident political conservatism of many leading Anglican Evangelicals who, well into the later nineteenth century, continued to emphasize the Irvingite concept of a covenanted nation and to interpret politics in terms of the 'laws of national duty', which they regarded as 'one main part of that law of eternal right, which is the foundation of the throne of God'.<sup>3</sup>

This was the essential basis of Birks's conservatism. He viewed 'everything' in 'the light of the progress or retardation of the Divine plan' and he 'firmly believed that the Christianity of the State bore the strongest connection with the place of the nation in the development of that plan'.<sup>4</sup>

Birks believed that the French Revolution of 1789 had ushered in a 'new era of Providence' as 'God's hour of judgement on the long-lasting idolatries of Christendom had begun'. During this time of crisis Britain had been blessed by a revival in religion and missionary zeal which had mercifully held back the spread of infidelity.<sup>5</sup> By the 1860s the nation appeared to be 'entering on a second and deeper stage of the same conflict'<sup>6</sup> with the 'assault on the Irish Church' being 'simply the crest of the immense tidewave of unbelief' that was 'sweeping over Christendom at the present hour'.<sup>7</sup> It had its apogee in the Liberal state 'with its new creed of neutrality' in religious matters which, Birks declared, would 'sink to

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<sup>2</sup>Thorold, A. W., 'The Evangelical Clergy of 1868', *The Contemporary Review*, 8, 1868, p. 592.

<sup>3</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State; or, National Religion and Church Establishments considered with reference to present controversies* (London, 1869), p. 327.

<sup>4</sup>In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.

<sup>5</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State*, pp. 408-9.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 410.

the level of the Continental democracies, and take its place among the toes of the Great Image, the powers which fulfil the predicted features of the infidel confederacy of the last days'.<sup>8</sup> Without the 'checks and balances' of a Protestant succession and an established church, Birks affirmed, the fickle 'many-headed despot' of popular sentiment would be the perfect 'tool' for the 'spirits of darkness' in 'carrying out their dark designs'.<sup>9</sup>

### Irish Disestablishment

The notion of a true Protestant Church, which the state was duty-bound to uphold and defend, was still very much alive well into the 1860s, although most leading politicians had largely abandoned the idea that the state possessed the capacity to determine religious truth. Nonetheless when Gladstone publicly advocated Irish disestablishment in March 1868, Disraeli's government, which had been entertaining ideas of concurrent endowment in Ireland during previous cabinet discussions, rallied to defend the idea of the state's prime duty to defend the establishment principle.<sup>10</sup> The subsequent general election was fought mainly on that issue with the Conservatives appealing to anti-Catholic and anti-ritualist sentiment and Liberals cultivating Nonconformist support.

The disestablishment issue 'remained at bottom one of politics'.<sup>11</sup> Even many of those Conservative M. P. s who opposed Gladstone's Bill to disestablish the Irish Church did not base their defence of the 'status quo' on religious grounds but were mainly preoccupied with fears that the Bill might open the flood-gates to far more sweeping constitutional changes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>10</sup>Bell, P. M. H., *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1869), pp. 86-87.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup>Fair, J. D., 'The Irish Disestablishment Conference of 1869', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 1975, p. 379-394.

Yet Anglican Evangelical clergymen continued to interpret politics in religious terms - anti-Catholicism was an important element in their polemics against the Bill, together with its supposed political overtones (its association with state and ecclesiastical despotism) - and they focused their opposition to the Bill, and its implicit principle of a sectarian characterization of the English Church, on the basis that the state was 'and must be allied to absolute truth'.<sup>13</sup> J. C. Ryle declared, for instance, that another civil war would be preferable to Gladstone's policies.<sup>14</sup>

Birks believed that the issue involved 'a principal of eternal and immutable morality'.<sup>15</sup> The Old Testament accounts of the reigns of David and Solomon recorded the providential favours received by those rulers who publicly acknowledged God. If those cases were exceptional, Birks asked, why did Moses attribute the greatness of the Israelite nation to its righteous statutes and judgements?<sup>16</sup> The perils of national apostasy were equally clear, culminating in the national rejection of the Messiah, which was followed by dire judgements 'intended for our admonition'.<sup>17</sup>

Evangelical Churchmen also foresaw an inevitable progression from Irish to English disestablishment and the full restoration of 'Popery'. If the sensuality of Popery were to be welcomed into the life of the nation and Establishment the 'distinctive manliness and independence of the British character' would 'dwindle, wither' and 'be destroyed'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State*, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup>Farley, I. D., 'J. C. Ryle, Episcopal Evangelist: A Study in Late Victorian Evangelicalism', unpublished PhD. thesis, Durham University, 1988, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup>(Report of the Islington Clerical Meeting), *Record*, 15 January 1869.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Ryle, J. C., *I Fear*, quoted in Farley, I. D., *op. cit.*, p. 88.



Birks revised and extended his earlier treatise on national establishments in the context of the disestablishment controversy. He continued to maintain the central prophetic focus of the earlier text, although the parliamentary debates were largely concerned with issues of constitutional principle.<sup>19</sup>

Birks accepted that the disestablishment question was one 'which lies at the very basis of our constitution'.<sup>20</sup> This was because, in his view, the British constitution was based on Christianity, embodying the 'fundamental relation between the nation and the living God'.<sup>21</sup> This covenant endured in the Protestant Succession, the Coronation Oath (whereby the monarch reigned by the grace of God, representing his authority and pledged to obey his word), the spiritual peers, prayers in Parliament and, above all, in the established church.<sup>22</sup> Hence, Birks argued, the 'liberal theory' now threatened 'the utter overthrow of the British Constitution'<sup>23</sup> and to replace it with the 'rule of bare majorities' holding sway over the Church, peers and crown.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, Irish disestablishment effectively amounted to a 'moral disestablishment' of the English Church because the state would no longer be treating it as a divinely ordained body.<sup>25</sup> Hence Birks believed that the nation was again passing 'through a great moral crisis' as a policy was promoted that attempted to overturn 'all social morality' and was 'criminal in the sight of God'. It was sure to 'issue, without repentance, in national judgements and moral ruin'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Bell, P. M. H., *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1869), pp. 54.

<sup>20</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State*, p. 377.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>26</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Preface' to *Church and State*.

The Voluntarism of the Liberationists, who had provided much of the impetus behind Gladstone's 1868 election victory, was, Birks argued, fatally flawed because it disregarded the Scriptural testimony to the fact that rulers as well as priests had spiritual obligations and duties. He maintained that it was impossible to make a sharp distinction between the civil and the sacred - everything was 'sacred in the eyes of faith'. Church leaders had a duty to guide and advise the governors of the state, while they, in turn, must repress evil and promote the holy and good, within the Church as well as outside it.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, arguments based on the principle of religious equality between rival creeds were a contradiction in terms and impossible. Equal honour could not be given to Anglicanism and Catholicism as one of them must be true and the other false - if Anglicanism was a true witness then 'all patronage of Rome by the State' was the patronage 'of idolatry and superstition, of blood-guiltiness, falsehood, and persecution'.<sup>28</sup>

Birks affirmed that the 'first essential' of real justice must be to discriminate between truth and falsehood - in religious matters as much as in social, political and moral questions. In response to the argument that certain truth in religious questions could never be discovered, and so statesmen ought to uphold religious equality, Birks drew a parallel with the justice of Solomon - it would not have been partial justice for Solomon to have given the real mother of the disputed child half a corpse - and similarly,

Christian faith can never be satisfied with a blindfold policy, which would split the difference between all religious creeds by allowing each an equal chance of being right, and uses the sword of justice to carve out for each an equal share of countenance and favour. Such a policy sacrifices the reality of justice to a worthless shadow. It commits murder on the living truth; and then provides, from

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<sup>27</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State*., p. 355.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 377.

the proceeds of the murder, worthless bribes for those whose guilty falsehood and jealousy has turned the sword of public justice into the instrument of a cruel and aggravated crime.<sup>29</sup>

### Ritualism and Sacramental Theology

Through the course of their disputes with Tractarians over baptismal and eucharistic theology, stimulated by the Gorham (1849-50) and Denison (1854-58) cases, Evangelicals had found themselves being forced into taking more clearly defined positions on sacramental theology. The intensity of feeling raised by the Gorham case, in particular, helped to ensure that the variety of beliefs concerning baptismal regeneration held by early nineteenth-century Anglican Evangelicals were gradually abandoned and, later in the century, regeneration was explicitly denied, with infant baptism being understood as an entirely symbolic rite. Hence, as a result of such doctrinal disputes, the theological identity of Anglican Evangelicalism had been considerably sharpened.<sup>30</sup>

Birks's contributions to the debates surrounding ritualistic developments in the Anglican church, like his publications on the disestablishment question, were based upon detailed expositions of Scripture. In a lecture given at the Kingston auxiliary of the Church Association he sought to demonstrate that modern ritualism had no basis in Old Testament worship. While the ritual practices of the Tabernacle and Temple services were 'instituted in obedience to the express command of God', modern Anglican ritualists, Birks argued, could not appeal to any rule or Law given by God himself and 'only professed to refer to the precedents of the Church Catholic; their ceremonial, instead of being according

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>30</sup>Toon, P., *Evangelical Theology, 1833-56: A Response to Tractarianism* (Basingstoke, 1979) pp. 206-207.

to the divine pattern, was derived from the traditions, inventions, and superstitions of men'.<sup>31</sup>

Ritual services were 'alien from the spirit, tone and temper of the New Testament' and so were 'directly opposed to the mind of the Spirit, and tended to falsify and pervert the worship of God'.<sup>32</sup> Paul had specifically rejected the attempts of the Galatian Christians to introduce them and had affirmed the 'relation of the types of the Law to the Antitype of the Gospel' as 'God had wisely arranged every part of the ceremonial in the Levitical economy on purpose to represent by them the great and lasting spiritual fruits of the kingdom of God'.<sup>33</sup>

The doctrine of the ministry was central to the ritualism controversy. A particular notion of the role of priest was 'at the root of what is called the Anglo-Catholic movement'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, according to Birks, there was 'no trace' of direct Scriptural evidence for a sacerdotal and mediatorial role for the Christian clergy. By contrast with the priestly sacrifices offered under Old Testament law, the New Testament emphasised Christ's final sacrifice and 'never once' referred to the apostles or their successors as priests. Hence the very nature of the new covenant and the language of the apostles clearly indicated that Christian orders were not sacrificial priests, but evangelists. All the 'new terms of office in the Christian Church centre' on the 'great work of preaching and teaching the Word of God'.<sup>35</sup> The ritualists, who were threatening to gain a 'fatal ascendancy' in 'our own nation', were promoting views 'dishonourable to the virtue and efficacy of

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<sup>31</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Old Testament and Modern Ritualism compared and contrasted', *Surrey Comet*, 16 January, 1869.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Nature and Office of the Christian Ministry' in Garbett, E. (ed.), *Evangelical Principles* (London, 1875), p. 207.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 228.

Christ's perfect and finished sacrifice, and fatal to the liberty and dangerous to the souls of Christian men'.<sup>36</sup>

Birks, possibly because of his concern with the challenges of Biblical criticism and evolutionary science, published relatively little on the ritualism controversy. He did gain recognition as one of the Vice-Presidents of the Church Association (1878-1880) but, as this appointment coincided with a period of incapacity due to illness, it seems likely to have been an honorary title.

Despite the powerful influence which the prophetic works of Edward Irving continued to have upon Birks, he appears to have been unaffected by the sacerdotalism of the Irvingites and the high church practices which were beginning to creep into Anglican Evangelicalism by the later nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Indeed Henry Venn, the moderate secretary of the Church Missionary Society, had written to Birks, while he was preparing a series of lectures to be given at the Islington Clerical Meeting, feeling that Birks's low view of the sacrament of baptism might prove unnecessarily controversial.<sup>38</sup>

In these lectures, Birks contended that the sacraments were not fundamental and primary elements of Christianity, but were of secondary importance.<sup>39</sup> The primary features of Christianity were those purely spiritual elements directly involved in the salvation of individuals - 'faith, hope, love, prayer, praise and obedience'.<sup>40</sup> These elements united the created spirit of man with the Holy Spirit and were thus of higher importance than the external ordinances linking man's outward, bodily, life with the truths, hopes and duties of

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 147-149.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Knight, W., *Memoir of the Rev. Henry Venn* (London, 1880), p. 275.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., *Thoughts on the Sacraments*, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

the Gospel.<sup>41</sup> This distinction reflected the contrasting Scriptural dispensations of the Old and New Testaments, 'the double contrast between condemnation and righteousness, between laws miraculously written on tables of stone, after the fiery flame of Sinai, and the writing of God's laws, inwardly and silently by the Spirit, on the tables of the heart'.<sup>42</sup> The sacraments were also treated as of secondary importance in the Pauline Epistles and there was no direct mention of them in Revelation, the 'crowning message' of the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> Hence while the sacraments were divinely ordained they were not to be regarded with superstitious reverence but only to be used in faith and humility 'as helps to lay hold on the gracious promises of Christ, and as blessed shadows and holy anticipations of the glorious realities of the life to come'.<sup>44</sup>

Birks maintained that the view of 'our Reformers, and of our Articles' and the literal sense of Christ's words instituting the Eucharist involved the rejection of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation and 'any doctrine of a local impanation of our Lord's body'.<sup>45</sup> Both Christ's body and the bread were simultaneously visible to those present at the Last Supper, 'separate and contrasted, and so, by the constant usage of language, the phrase used by Christ to institute the sacrament in its 'proper literal sense must be, "This represents my body"'.<sup>46</sup>

Birks believed that this view did not tend to deprive the Eucharist of its role as an effectual means of grace. This was because Christ's words implied and conveyed 'a promise with regard to the thing signified' - an assurance of spiritual blessing, a 'pledge of our common participation in all the benefits, which our

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<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

Lord has procured to His faithful disciples through the shedding of His most precious blood'.<sup>47</sup>

Birks's argument was well received and other contributors to the discussion which followed agreed on the essential need to distinguish the sacraments from human tradition and ecclesiastical authority, in order to emphasize that solifidianism was the 'great central principle of the Christian system'.<sup>48</sup> Bishop McIlvaine of Ohio took up the 'lucid and formidable' line of Birks's lecture to argue that the Ritualists' conception of church authority had no foundation in Scripture.<sup>49</sup> The Rev. Layard also agreed with Birks's contention that the sacraments had an essentially symbolic function.<sup>50</sup>

Other speakers sought to clarify whether the words of institution of the Lord's Supper could, if interpreted literally, admit any real bodily presence during communion as the high ritualists maintained.<sup>51</sup> Birks insisted that the substantive word "is" could not have been understood by the Apostles in the sense used by Catholic writers - it had to signify representation. If it had been the intention to suggest any change or transubstantiation, a different word would have had to have been employed. The phrase 'clearly referred' to the 'blood which was shed and not the glorified body in heaven'.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

Birks continued to conceive civil government and church politics from within a theological frame of reference. This had been the basic stand-point of

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup>Rev. Prebendary Macdonald, quoted in the report of the Islington Clerical Meeting, *Record*, 17 January 1873.

<sup>49</sup>(Report of the Islington Clerical Meeting), *Record*, 17 January 1873.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>E. B. Pusey (1800-1882) had been suspended from preaching for two years after defending the doctrine of the Real Presence in a sermon preached before the University of Oxford; Yates, W. N., *The Oxford Movement and Anglican Ritualism* (London, 1983), p. 18.

<sup>52</sup>(Report of the Islington Clerical Meeting), *Record*, 17 January 1873.

'Recordite' Evangelicals during the constitutional upheavals of the nineteenth century. Democracy was equated with expediency and contrasted with the Scriptural ideal of a nation under God. The 'main drift' of the Liberalism 'of Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Bright, and Mr. Chamberlain,' was to 'banish the name of Christ and of the one true God from our national councils and from our national education, and to enthrone in its stead the ballot box and the addition table, or the despotism of mere numbers'.<sup>53</sup>

Irish disestablishment was regarded as a great national sin and as a disastrous set-back in the 'great conflict' between 'Popery' and the Reformation, 'the Christ of God and the Antichrist of unbelief'.<sup>54</sup> It was taken to be a 'sure precursor of heavy and sore judgements on the land'.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, Birks also felt that the strife of the national church would be likely 'to be followed by some work of mercy to God's ancient people, to prepare the way for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel'.<sup>56</sup> A 'light will spring out of darkness' as 'though gross darkness may cover the nations, and the Positive Philosophy lap the world in thick shades of unbelief, there will be light at eventide to the true Church ... until at length, in the midst of trouble and conflict, the day shall dawn, and the true Day-star shall appear'.<sup>57</sup>

The spread of catholic 'darkness', the separation of church and state and of 'liberalism' in intellectual and political life were thus still interpreted by Birks from within a prophetic frame of reference popularized by Irving in the 1820s. Birks's adventist stance is particularly striking given his status in the church and, from 1872, in Cambridge University and it demonstrates that the 'extremism' of

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<sup>53</sup>Birks, T. R. Letter to Editor, *Record*, 8 April, 1880.

<sup>54</sup>Birks, T. R., *Six Letters to the Protestants of England, on the Irish Church Question ... Reprinted from 'The Record' Newspaper* (London, 1868), p. 12.

<sup>55</sup>Birks, T. R., *Church and State*, p. 420.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 419-420.



the Irvingites had been adopted by Anglican Evangelicals of distinction who carried the same ideas forward well into the later nineteenth century.

Birks's brand of prophetically influenced political conservatism is an element of the longer-term theological and spiritual legacy of Irving that has been neglected by historians. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will assess the extent to which Birks's theological and controversial publications of the 1860s and 1870s also reflect upon the historical importance of premillennial adventism in the development of Evangelical thought and suggest how it can provide a better understanding of the process of theological change within the wider context of Victorian culture.

## CHAPTER IX

### **Christology, salvation and the future life**

The traditional starting point of Evangelical theology had been the fall of man and the consequent 'utter Depravity of human nature'.<sup>1</sup> This affirmation of human corruption was fundamental to the Evangelical understanding of Christianity as it located man in nature, history and grace, between God the creator and Christ the redeemer.

Christ's atoning sacrifice was regarded as the only remedy for the sinful nature of man and it represented the 'central doctrine' of Evangelical Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Evangelicals stressed that sinners could only be redeemed through Christ's having borne the sinners' punishment, appeasing the just anger of God. It was only by personal faith in that atonement, and not by other merits or good works, that a man's soul could be saved.

Consequently, Evangelicals also emphasised the harshness of divine judgement facing unbelievers, and a very literal understanding of hell was

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<sup>1</sup>'Basis' of the Evangelical Alliance (1846).

<sup>2</sup>Cumming, J., *Popular Lectures on 'The Essays and Reviews'* (1862) quoted in Altholz, J. L. 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Responses to 'Essays and Reviews', 1860-1864' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, volume IV, Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 30.

characteristic of Evangelical preaching during this period. J. A. James's popular tract *The Anxious Enquirer* (1834), for example, declared that the 'loss of a sinner's 'soul' ensured 'the eternal endurance of the wrath of God' and the threat of hell underpinned both Evangelical social morality and their missions to the heathen.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, liberal churchmen and intellectuals were increasingly beginning to question whether the conventional interpretations of substitutionary atonement and the eternal punishment of the unregenerate could actually reflect the character and purposes of a moral and loving deity. Evangelicals felt that such moral criticisms of Christian orthodoxy were tending to undermine the role and status of Christ within the Christian scheme of redemption and belief, as Christ himself had made explicit and repeated references to the damnation of the lost. Similarly, the significance of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross appeared to be greatly diminished if its purpose was not to save mankind from hell.

In 1867 Birks published his most important and controversial work of eschatology, *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, feeling compelled by the intensity of contemporary debates to make public views he had developed thirty years earlier, but previously discussed in detail only in private correspondence. This work, together with Birks's other publications of the 1860s and 1870s, demonstrate that Birks had developed original and sophisticated interpretations of the doctrines of the atonement, justification and the future life that constituted significant contributions to the Evangelical tradition.

Birks's ideas provoked hostile reaction from some other Evangelical writers and this chapter will seek to demonstrate that these debates between

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<sup>3</sup>Rowell, G., *Hell and the Victorians: A study of the nineteenth-century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life* (Oxford, 1974), p. 1.

Evangelicals provide an important insight into the initial development of the division between 'liberal' and 'conservative' Evangelical positions. It will also be argued that Birks's thought reflects prevailing cultural and intellectual trends. In particular, the significant parallels between Birks and prominent 'liberal' thinkers will be discussed.

The Biblical doctrine concerning the fall of man provided the essential context for considering the significance of Christ's atonement and its role in the redemption and salvation of mankind. Nonetheless, the Evangelical emphasis upon the fall and its consequences seemed, to some prominent mid-Victorian intellectuals, to be difficult to reconcile with a conception of a benevolent deity. Churchmen like F. D. Maurice were also looking to promote a less morally offensive understanding of the doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

Birks believed that criticism of the morality of this doctrine resulted from the fact that interpretations of original sin and man's depravity had deviated from Scripture. He sought to demonstrate that a distinction had to be made between the effects of the fall upon human nature and on the will. Man's corrupted animal nature, inherited from Adam simply and absolutely by the natural law of reproduction, resisted the restraints of divine law and was a perpetual temptation to the higher nature, the spiritual will. This was also derived from our natural parents and, on its own, would inevitably succumb to temptations of the flesh, more certainly than Adam fell.<sup>5</sup>

The act of Adam, in yielding to a temptation that he might have resisted, represented 'a precedent' that was 'invariably followed' rather 'than a physical necessity imposed with a fatal power' upon mankind. Man's common inheritance

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<sup>4</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., *From Coleridge to Gore, A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (London, 1971), p. 173.

<sup>5</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall* (Cambridge, 1855), pp. 178-179.

was the 'corrupt inclinations of the fleshly nature' but 'the personal yielding to temptation, the deliberate choice of evil instead of good', was a 'personal, unreasonable, wilful and inexcusable rebellion against the voice of Divine Love'.<sup>6</sup> This 'choice of the known wrong, and rejection of the known right' was a burden that every sinner contracted for himself, and which, 'apart from some work of redeeming mercy, he must bear as his own burden in the final judgement'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus all men, as

they share one common fleshly nature with their first parent, are involved naturally and necessarily in the effects of his fall; while, so far as they are persons individually responsible, who rise successively to the knowledge of good and evil, and to the power of choice between them, they have invariably, with the same guilty abuse of the Divine gift of reason, repeated in various forms the sin of their forefather, and accumulated on their own heads fresh guilt and misery.<sup>8</sup>

#### The Atonement

The doctrine of the atonement had been regarded as the 'core' of orthodox Evangelical thought.<sup>9</sup> Fallen sinners, it was believed, could only be redeemed through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, which constituted a substitution for the punishment merited by the sins of mankind, and justification came through faith in the efficacy of that atonement. In the popular epic poem written by E. H. Bickersteth, Birks's former pupil and brother-in-law, *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever* (London, 1866), the central book, entitled 'Redemption', demonstrates a

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<sup>6</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God; or, thoughts on the difficulties of belief, in connection with Providence and Redemption* (London, 1863), pp. 37-8.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121. Birks did not believe that mankind were condemned to damnation because of Original Sin. As a consequence of Adam's fall they were exposed to temporal death but the second death, or sentence of final judgement on the ungodly, was 'always referred exclusively' in Scripture 'to their own personal guilt, and never once to Adam's transgression': *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall* (Cambridge, 1855), p. 169.

<sup>9</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795 - 1865* (Oxford, 1988), p. 3.

characteristically Evangelical focus upon the cross as the centre of the eternal battle between God and Satan, good and evil, love and death.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1860s, the challenge of higher criticism had brought the authority of the relevant New Testament texts concerning this doctrine into question. Biblical criticism proved to be especially threatening to the doctrine of the atonement because doubts concerning the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch challenged the conventional theory of successive divine revelations, which had depicted Moses as a prototype of Christ performing a comparable mediatorial role between man and God. The morality of orthodox interpretations of the atonement was also being questioned. F. D. Maurice, for example, criticised popular preaching for promoting a legalistic interpretation of the doctrine that could only 'outrage the conscience' of modern believers. Jowett's famous notes to an edition of the Pauline Epistles (1855) raised similar moral doubts.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Birks continued to regard the atonement as 'the heart and life of Christianity'.<sup>12</sup> He denied, however, that the atonement was merely a mechanical substitution for sin and felt repelled by the 'legalism' of conventional apologetics and the financial terminology which leading Evangelicals, like Chalmers, had generally used to describe and justify the orthodox view of Christ's atoning sacrifice. He condemned the 'barren fictions of a mercantile theology' which,

debases right and wrong to the level of a money payment, and reduces a truth, on which the eternal interests of mankind are said to depend, to the same category with the transfer of Government securities in the ledger books of the Stock Exchange.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Bickersteth, E. H., *Yesterday, To-Day and For-ever* (London, 1866), Book VII.

<sup>11</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Warfare of Conscience with Theology' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. iv; *Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 157.

<sup>12</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (London, 1867), p. 147.

<sup>13</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 121.

He also felt that recent liberal reassessments were based upon a 'spurious, sentimental theology' and advocated what he believed to be a middle way between these two extremes, reconciling the 'laws' of universal divine justice with the 'deepest instincts' of man's moral conscience. The concept of substitution was, he insisted, still 'the most fundamental of all the fundamental truths of the Gospel'.<sup>14</sup> The 'key' to the whole issue was, he believed, to understand that substitution went beyond the scope of narrow legalistic definitions. The just authority of God simply required that 'the curse of the law should be exhausted, altogether irrespective of any change or any renewal, or anything affecting the character of the sinner'.<sup>15</sup> In this sense legal substitution consisted simply in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. As well as this aspect of substitution, 'directly and immediately towards God', substitution also had, Birks believed, an 'aspect towards God indirectly through the medium of the character of the sinner'.<sup>16</sup>

Birks thus sought to refute the assumption that the purpose of the atonement was to satisfy divine wrath and thereby to awaken divine compassion for sinners. Such views misrepresented God, as a wronged tyrant, and the nature of the atonement, which was a manifestation of both divine justice and mercy. Birks insisted that the love of the Father preceded and introduced the redeeming grace of the Son. Through an act of love,

He took on Himself the whole burden of a guilty race, so far as its transfer was possible, consistently with the inflexible and eternal laws of righteousness, and made "a full, perfect, and sufficient satisfaction for the sins of the whole world," so far as it retained the character of a separable evil, that might still be renounced

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<sup>14</sup>(Report of the Islington Clerical Meeting), *Record*, 13 January 1862.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* The report of this meeting does not record the discussion of Birks's views, as there were a number of main speakers that year each giving an account of different 'Fundamental Doctrines'. The *Record* editorial did, however, welcome the fact that Birks intended to give a full account of his views in published form.

and forsaken, and was not transformed, by enduring impenitence, into an inseparable part of the sinner's moral being.<sup>17</sup>

This distinction between the collective guilt of the whole human race and the personal guilt of individuals was central to Birks's interpretation of the atonement. It enabled him to address the main ambiguity in the conventional 'moderate' Calvinism of Evangelical Anglicans, which had been based on an understanding of the atonement offering a potential general redemption but actually being savingly effective only for God's elect. Moderate Calvinists had generally been wary of attempting to explain the precise nature of the relation between the act of the atonement, as sufficient to save all, and the effectual election to salvation of only a chosen few.<sup>18</sup>

Birks sought to emphasize that the atonement had a two-fold character. It was both a public declaration of God's righteousness, in a manifestation of saving grace, and it had a specific reference to individuals as the 'largeness and grandeur of the sacrifice, as offered for all, cannot destroy its individual reference, but only makes its application plain, easy and direct to each individual conscience'.<sup>19</sup> Hence the element of vicarious substitution in Christ's sacrifice was not in the nature of a legal transaction, but one that was brought about by individuals 'believing in a work already done for them before they believe, and by their depending on Him, and Him alone, who atoned for them by His death'.<sup>20</sup>

Birks contended that Scripture clearly stated both that Christ's atonement was universal and also that the majority of mankind were beyond salvation. He declared that he accepted 'the doctrine of the Catechism with equal heartiness in its second and third clauses, that "God the Son hath redeemed all mankind", and

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<sup>17</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 213-14.

<sup>18</sup>Ervine, W. J. C., 'Doctrine and diplomacy: some aspects of the life and thought of the Anglican evangelical clergy, 1797-1837', PhD. thesis, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 35-41.

<sup>19</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement* (London, 1870), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.



that God the Holy Ghost "sanctifieth all the elect people of God".<sup>21</sup> The sins of all mankind, as debts of guilt from the breach of divine law, were laid upon Christ and cancelled on the Cross. Nonetheless, the 'present guilt' of individual men 'in the rejection of grace and disbelief of God's promise' was not 'cancelled' until they repented and believed.<sup>22</sup>

The fate of the lost did not, however, diminish the significance and efficacy of the atonement itself. It had to be viewed, Birks maintained, in the light of the two-fold character of sin. Sin was both a collective 'debt' owed by all mankind for their transgressions against the Law of God, and a personal 'disease' of the spirit. The 'disease' needed to be healed by inward repentance even though the debt had been 'borne and paid by a substitute'.<sup>23</sup> For the atonement to be efficacious an individual change of heart was still necessary, a genuine faith in the 'magnetic transforming power of the Cross of Christ'.

Birks was also concerned to emphasize that the Bible applied the term substitute constantly to the death of Christ, in which he bore the curse of sinners. Hence substitution 'must include something averted from all those for whom it was made' and, Birks believed, this was reflected in the Scriptural distinction between the first and second deaths, or between the temporal and the spiritual and eternal deaths.<sup>24</sup> Birks contended that 'the temporal consequences of sin had been so altered by substitution, that the first death in its rigour had never been, and never would be, endured by any of the race of Adam as Christ endured it'.<sup>25</sup>

It was not widely appreciated that Birks had firmly rejected the Arminian position, that the atonement was intended as an offer of salvation to all men,

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup>(Report of the Islington Clerical Meeting), *Record*, 13 January 1862.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

arguing that it was not made for persons irrespective of character, but was confined exclusively to penitents.<sup>26</sup> Birks continued to describe himself as a moderate Calvinist, maintaining that the atonement was redemptively applied to those made regenerate through gracious sovereign election by the Spirit. Nonetheless, his interpretation of the atonement can also be seen to have placed a novel emphasis upon the responsibility and accountability of man.

One writer regarded Birks's belief that the atonement had been made for persons in the view of them being penitent, rather than 'in the view of them being carnal and impenitent', as pleading for an atonement 'unknown to the jurisprudence of this world' and 'in the most direct opposition to the principles of Divine Law'.<sup>27</sup> In making the distinction between the collective and personal dimensions of the atonement, Birks had confused the dispensations of grace and the law, so that 'the characteristics of distinct and opposed systems, meet and mingle ... in the theology of Mr. Birks, and work harmoniously together on the field of one and the same dispensation, administered on the joint and common principles of grace and law, at the same time'.<sup>28</sup> This writer, like other critics of Birks's approach, sought to reaffirm the element of penal substitution in the atonement. Christ's death was 'a sacrifice of righteousness which in our persons was the penalty of sin', discharging that mortal debt in our stead.<sup>29</sup>

Yet this author also concluded by praising Birks's contribution to the contemporary debate, where advocates of general and particular redemption were 'trumpeting over one another an account of the absurd or monstrous conclusions

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<sup>26</sup>Culbertson errs in stating that Birks 'took the Arminian position on universal atonement'; Culbertson, E. M., 'Evangelical Theology, 1857-1900', PhD. thesis, King's College London, 1991, p. 139. Birks affirmed, 'I have never become an Arminian for a moment', *The Atonement and the Judgement*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup>Anon., *Propitiatory Sacrifice and the Sacrifice of Christ according to Scripture and Catholic Antiquity, with an Appendix on the scheme of Mr. Birks* (London, 1864), p. 110.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

which their different theologies involve' and 'Mr. Birks has fed us with the meat of the doctrine of which they show us only the two shells, pointing out that our Lord mediated under a dispensation of moral probation, and this, exclusively, for penitents'.<sup>30</sup>

### The Incarnation

From the 1820s Irving and his followers proposed that the Word came immediately in the guise of divine inspiration. Irving also came to insist that the incarnation was more than simply a means to the atonement. He maintained that it was a direct manifestation of God to men and, controversially, emphasized Christ's fallen humanity, his brotherhood with all men, claiming that his overcoming of this human nature was a lifelong work of the Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

Some aspects of Irving's conception of the incarnation were widely influential and were further developed in the theology of McLeod Campbell and F. D. Maurice. These theologians replaced the traditional interpretations of the atonement as a manifestation of divine justice with a view of it as an essentially symbolic gesture of divine love. They formulated a theology that was centred upon the incarnation of Christ and a Christian compassion inspired by His life.<sup>32</sup>

Birks's emphasis upon the personal, as well as the collective, aspect of Christ's sacrifice reflects this trend in nineteenth-century religious thought. The atonement was, according to Birks, not only a ransom but also a 'moral magnet' and could only operate in conjunction with a personal faith in the incarnation of Christ.<sup>33</sup> Birks, like Maurice, sought to move away from a narrow view of

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement*, pp. 285-286.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 288-297.

<sup>33</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, p. 161.

substitutionary atonement and towards a more incarnationalist stance based upon a conception of Christ's headship of the whole human race. He declared that,

I affirm that substitution belongs, exclusively, to His sacrifice and death; but that federal headship refers to His whole work, *including* that sacrifice, from His Incarnation to His return in glory.<sup>34</sup>

### Justification

Evangelical theologians had traditionally emphasized that the essence of Christ's saving work consisted in his having been an innocent victim who had borne the sinner's punishment. This had led them to consider the further questions of what was the extent and meaning of Christ's substitution, and what role did his active obedience to divine law have in the personal salvation of individual sinners?

J. T. O' Brien's (1792 - 1874) treatise on the nature and effects of faith, *An Attempt to explain the Doctrine of Justification by Faith only, in Ten Sermons* (1833), had become a standard work of Evangelical interpretation of the thought of the Reformers on justification and individual salvation. A new edition of this work was published in 1862 and Birks drafted a detailed response to it which remained unpublished during his lifetime. This text was published posthumously, under the title *Justification and Imputed Righteousness*, after the Evangelical H. C. G. Moule and the Anglo-Catholic Charles Gore had both published works on justification.

Bishop O' Brien's text had argued that justification, the divine act by which believing sinners were pardoned and accepted as righteous, was a judicial declaration. Sinners were acquitted from the charge of violating the divine law and accepted as though they had been obedient. This came about through a

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<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement*, pp. 21-22.

double imputation of Christ's righteousness - his penal sufferings secured their forgiveness and his active obedience to divine law during his lifetime entitled believers to the privileges due to those who had kept the law.

Birks argued against this form of narrow legalistic statement of the doctrine of justification. He claimed that, firstly, no sinner could ever obtain justification by a law that actually condemned him. Secondly, this form of apologetic necessarily involved a false view of Christ's obedience - that he had an actual right and privilege to disobey God, while, in fact, his divine perfection made it impossible for him ever to do so and hence Christ's obedience provided no surplus of merit that could be capable of transfer to others.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly, Birks maintained that the legal innocence of fallen sinners could neither be true or possible. Birks cited the authority of Paul's discourse at Antioch<sup>36</sup> and affirmed that sinners remained guilty under the law and could only be pardoned from a punishment that they rightly deserved.

Gospel justification was, according to Birks, firstly, a non-imputation or a 'free pardon of confessed sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ' and it annulled 'the hold of the law as a covenant upon the guilty sinner', 'standing in direct contrast to the terms and scope of a legal justification'.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, justification was closely allied to the process of sanctification as it involved 'the gracious acceptance of the faith of the believer, and still further, of the fruits of faith, the new creation of the Spirit, as well-pleasing and acceptable to God, through the power of Christ's Resurrection, and the union of the believer with his risen Lord'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Birks, T., R., *Justification and Imputed Righteousness* (London, 1887), pp. 130-131.

<sup>36</sup>'By him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses' (Acts, XIII., 39).

<sup>37</sup>Birks, T. R., *Justification and Imputed Righteousness* (London, 1887), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

Hence Birks interpreted the doctrine of justification by faith alone as true in the sense that all who believed were justified even before their faith had issued in obedience and righteousness, but not true in the sense that faith was the sole instrument of justification, as there was direct scriptural evidence to the contrary.<sup>39</sup> Birks maintained that Christian life represented a progress from first acceptance into divine favour, at conversion, to the final acceptance on the day of judgement. Faith alone was thus 'the initiatory' grace but 'love' was 'the final and perfective grace'.<sup>40</sup> The fuller measure of divine favour was

expressly reserved, till the work of their moral recovery is complete, and the full restoration of their soul to the Divine image is consummated by the act of final and complete adoption, the redemption of the body in the great day of resurrection.<sup>41</sup>

### Regeneration

Redemption involved the free forgiveness of past sin, through the atoning death of Christ, with the gift of a new regenerate life by the power of his resurrection. But if salvation depended entirely on a secret work of the Spirit, in which the fallen will played no part, why was it withheld from the great majority of mankind ?

Birks contended that the work of the Spirit must not be seen as the arbitrary exercise of divine power. Its very nature involved moral means and the employment of great spiritual truths, truths that included the fact of abounding wickedness in a world of unregenerate sinners. Both moral repulsion at the hatefulness and prevalence of sin and moral attraction to the vision of especial

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<sup>39</sup>James, II, 14-26.

<sup>40</sup>Birks, T. R., *Justification and Imputed Righteousness* (London, 1887), p. 79.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

and distinguishing grace were central to the revealed Scriptural accounts of regeneration.

The speciality of grace and the unbelief of his fellow countrymen had been prominent features in the conversion of St. Paul, which formed the archetype for the dealings of God with men in future generations.<sup>42</sup> The previous rejection of the Gospel by others and the speciality of grace to those who received and obeyed it were thus elements constantly involved in the work of spiritual regeneration.<sup>43</sup>

There was no Scriptural warrant for the notion that saving grace might ever be universally imparted. On the contrary, with respect to the rebellion of fallen men on one side and the present 'unfinished stage of Divine revelation on the other, to save some' was 'the highest work of love which is morally possible'. The sovereignty of Divine grace was to be seen, 'not in with-holding larger results ... but in choosing freely the objects of its especial grace, according to secret laws of infinite wisdom and love'.<sup>44</sup>

Birks argued that the Church would cease to be a church if the reception of the gospel were universal and that, as membership of the Church was the outward means of spiritual regeneration, 'the speciality of Divine grace' was, in fact, greatly intensified by the fact that it was not universally bestowed.<sup>45</sup>

Birks believed that the ranks of the Church extended to include the Old Testament patriarchs. He maintained that the text of I Peter III, 18-20 describing the preaching of Jesus to the saints in prison represented a parallel to his ascension journey to heaven.<sup>46</sup> It followed that the harsh and apparently

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<sup>42</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 147. Theologians distinguish between common grace, or blessings given to the entire human race (such as God's continuing providential care of his creation), and special, saving, regenerating, grace bestowed only on those whom God gives eternal life through faith in Christ; Hughes, P. E., 'Grace' in Elwell, W. A. (ed.), *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (London, 1993), p. 210.

<sup>43</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 150.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>46</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, pp. 28-29.

indiscriminate judgements of the Old Testament, culminating in the devastation of the Flood, had to be seen in this broader context - redemption was 'not arrested in its backward course by the waters of the Flood, but extends to righteous Abel, to the sainted Enoch, and to all those who were outwardly involved in the universal Deluge, but whose secret repentance was known to the eye of God alone'.<sup>47</sup>

Birks also reaffirmed his belief in a future redemption in the new earth to be created following Christ's millennial reign.<sup>48</sup> While the fruit of holy love now appeared scanty, it was necessary to 'look forward to a period yet to come, when those labours shall be crowned with an abundant harvest'.<sup>49</sup>

#### Death, Resurrection and the Future Life

For Birks, the Scriptural testimony to the universal atonement of Christ ensured that the resurrection of the wicked, as well as of the just, from the first death resulted from this atoning sacrifice.<sup>50</sup> He continued to maintain that the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead, preceded by an intermediate state before the second advent of Christ, admitted of 'no doubt whatsoever'. He declared that there was absolutely no Scriptural evidence for the popular assumption that only the presence of an earthly body hindered the spirit from soaring straight to heaven. As a specific scriptural warrant for a belief in an intermediate state he pointed to Biblical accounts like the resurrection of Lazarus; such an event could not be taken as a token of Divine grace and favour

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Chapter 3.

<sup>49</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 156.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.



if Lazarus had been brought back from a higher to a lower form of consciousness and existence.<sup>51</sup>

Evangelical Churchmen were, by the mid-nineteenth century, commonly looking to give descriptive accounts of the heavenly state that were both coherent and complete, centred on the doctrine of the heavenly reunion. Birks believed that the earthly bodies of the dead were to be miraculously resurrected and so he failed to see 'how a moment's hesitation' could arise on this issue, which he believed was clearly expressed or implied in scriptural descriptions of heavenly blessedness.<sup>52</sup>

The very idea of a future life necessarily involved the concept of a continuous personal identity in which the wicked were punished for their personal sins and, for the righteous, the joy of heaven must include individual gratitude for past mercies. For them, heaven was to be both a communion with God in Christ and also a state of personal and social perfection.

Birks still adhered to a harsh view of divine judgement, with a stark division of mankind into the two categories of the saved and the lost.<sup>53</sup> Christ's sacrifice on the cross could not save the unregenerate from the second death, described in Revelation, the retributive sentence on those for whom there remains no further sacrifice, and 'so far as the Word of God throws light upon the solemn subject, no hope of a final recovery, but whose moral state is fixed for ever'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet Birks also believed that 'issues of judgement, however solemn, must be such that' a loving God 'can not only acquiesce in them, but even rejoice in them with a deep complacency of divine love'.<sup>55</sup> As a result he condemned

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<sup>51</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, p. 54 ff.

<sup>52</sup>Birks's defence of a bodily resurrection has been discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief in connection with the Creation and the Fall, Redemption and Judgement* (second edition; London, 1876), p. 195.

<sup>54</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God*, p. 138.

<sup>55</sup>Birks, T. R., *Difficulties of Belief* (second edition, London, 1876), p. 195.

traditional depictions of the fate of the lost, as an existence of 'ever-during, self-tormenting wickedness, unrestricted by the hand of God', declaring that such torments could only belong 'to that death, which is God's last enemy, and which Christ has come to destroy and abolish forever'.<sup>56</sup> The second death was not, therefore, the reign of Satan, in his own kingdom, tormenting his victims forever. Scripture clearly stated that death, hell, and the works of the devil would finally be destroyed.<sup>57</sup>

Hence, both in the case of the saved and the unsaved, 'the Son of God will not have borne the curse and endured shame and agony in vain'.<sup>58</sup> It was the 'common boon' which the atonement secured to both the saved and the unsaved that Satan,

the sum of all possible evil and every misery in a God-forsaken universe, is destroyed, abolished, and done away with forever.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, Birks argued that the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked had to be set in the broader context of the 'historical plan of redemption', the 'death and resurrection of Christ', 'his future return and the resurrection of his people'.<sup>60</sup> Birks thus sought to interpret the doctrine of eternal punishment in terms of his premillennial eschatology, and in doing so he drew attention to the prophetic descriptions of the salvation of nations, as well as individuals. Biblical descriptions of the final judgement, eternal blessing and punishment were to be interpreted collectively and with reference to individuals, as the personal misery of lost souls was plainly described in Scripture. Yet the

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<sup>56</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, p. 167.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

purpose of divine judgement was not, in itself, merely to punish sin, but to abolish all such wrongdoing forever.<sup>61</sup>

Scripture gave a solemn assurance that the penal sentence of the wicked would never be reversed, but the depth of divine love that 'passeth knowledge' gave an equal assurance that their doom would not be one of unmitigated misery and that, without 'reversing their doom', God's love may send them 'a thrill of wondrous consolation through the abyss of what would else be unmingled woe and despair'.<sup>62</sup> Their punishment was of such a nature that it did not exclude the lost from some passive, but real, contemplation of the divine goodness, demonstrating that God was both perfect justice and mercy.<sup>63</sup> Birks maintained that the future condition of the lost would

combine, with the utmost personal shame and humiliation and anguish, the passive contemplation of a ransomed universe and of all the innumerable varieties of blessedness enjoyed by unfallen spirits and the ransomed people of God; such a contemplation as would be fitted, in its own nature, to raise the soul into a trance of holy adoration in the presence of infinite and unsearchable Goodness.<sup>64</sup>

The doom of the lost was also the object of 'acquiescence and contemplation' on the part of the redeemed. However solemn that doom might be it could not, therefore, be a state of unmingled horror, darkness and blasphemy. Although unbelievers were not saved from divine judgement, the second death and the unquenchable fire, they were saved, as Christ had died for all men, from temporal death and corruption, from the curse of hopeless vanity, from the abyss of hopeless misery and of everlasting despair. As the judgement of the wicked

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<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

was a work of God's mercy, as well as his judicial righteousness, divine mercy denied them the 'full power' of adding 'sin to sin', keeping from them the power of hurting each other, and must be able to 'force them back' to 'the presence of that infinite goodness'.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, as some critics pointed out, the victory of divine goodness could not be total if the wills of the lost were still not in harmony with God. Henry Constable, Prebendary of Cork, declared, for instance, that, 'This melancholy congregation of hell seem to us like criminals condemned to perpetual imprisonment ... beneath the perpetual watchfulness of a stern gaoler, but who assuredly love not the law which has passed upon them their changeless sentence'.<sup>66</sup>

Constable was one of a small number of Anglican Evangelicals, including a number of adventists, who, from the 1870s, were drawn to conditionalism. Conditionalists maintained that the death sentence passed on mankind, from the fall of Adam, was mercifully withheld and that all who believed in Christ were to be saved, and thus immortal, while the rest were to be annihilated, either at death or after a period of retributive punishment. Constable felt that the 'truest victory of divine goodness' would be 'displayed in the destruction of the wicked'.<sup>67</sup>

Birks declared that all forms of conditionalism were impossible to reconcile with the texts of the Bible. In particular, Christ's recorded use of the word *aionios* to define the extent of both the punishment of the wicked and the blessing of the righteous could only be interpreted as meaning of eternal duration.<sup>68</sup> Revelation also clearly indicated that by the time of judgement the

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<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>66</sup>Constable, H., 'Hell: Regarded as a place where it is "good" but not "honourable" to be', *The Rainbow*, June 1869, p. 273.

<sup>67</sup>Constable, H., 'Hell: Regarded as a place where it is "good" but not "honourable" to be', Part II, *The Rainbow*, August, 1869, p. 357.

<sup>68</sup>Birks, T. R., *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (second edition, 1878), p. 422.

resurrection has already occurred and temporal death itself has been abolished and cast into the lake of fire. Hence a subsequent annihilation of the unregenerate 'would not only reverse the original work of creation', it would also reverse 'that more recent act of new creation' by which all had 'been raised from the dead before they stand in judgement'.<sup>69</sup>

Birks believed that the 'gifts and calling of God' were 'without repentance'. If the divine gift took the form of a conscious spiritual nature, 'fitted in itself to endure forever', only to be later withdrawn, then this would 'seem to reverse a great law of God's moral government'. Birks went on to emphasize the direct relationship of both the faithful and the unbelieving to God, as a righteous judge of creatures made in his own image, declaring that the annihilation of the unfaithful was inconceivable because of 'their common relation to Him as the bountiful Creator of all men, and the God of grace towards all who are sunk in guilt or misery'.<sup>70</sup>

Birks also maintained that the continuing knowledge of the fate of the lost on the part of the blessed made redemption, for them, a perpetually revealed, present reality. If the wicked were simply to be annihilated, then redemption would merely be the recollection of an ever fading past as far as the blessed were concerned. E. H. Plumptre drew a parallel between the fate of the unsaved on this view and the condemnation of Judas - 'it had been good for that man if he had not been born'.<sup>71</sup> Their 'honour is lost for ever', Birks affirmed, but their continued existence 'remains good, better than not being'.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>70</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Difficulties of Belief* (second edition, London, 1876), p. 240.

<sup>71</sup>Matthew, XXVI, 24.

<sup>72</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, p. 195. E. H. Bickersteth's apocalyptic epic poem, *Yesterday, To-Day and Forever* (1866), depicts the spirits of the blessed gazing into the 'awful Deep',

'And the view  
So wrought in them, that perfect self-distrust,  
With pity not unmix'd and tender tears,

The Evangelical Alliance: orthodoxy and heresy

A solicitor, R. Baxter, led an attack on Birks's views on the afterlife within the ranks of the Evangelical Alliance and in December 1868 the Alliance's treasurer R. C. L. Bevan required him to make an 'unqualified contradiction' of the charge that he held 'modified views' on eternal punishment.<sup>73</sup> Birks sent a private statement of his position, only to discover that Bevan had intended to use it in an attempt to have him expelled from the organization. Birks eventually resigned his office as honorary secretary of the Alliance, but announced his intention of remaining a member without retracting his opinions.<sup>74</sup>

Baxter's move for expulsion had failed as the Council of the Alliance were ultimately unwilling to set themselves up as a theological tribunal, the majority accepting a statement from Birks to the effect that the sinful would be punished.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, sixteen Council members still felt strongly enough to resign their positions.<sup>76</sup>

One of the Council members who had resigned, the Scottish Free Church leader R. S. Candlish, characterized Birks's position on the doctrine of the future life as 'really that of Universal Restitution'. He pointed to Birks's assertion that the strokes of divine judgement not only put an end to the active opposition of sinners to God's will but also removed the enmity in their hearts, forcing their willing subjection to God. If the second death thus works some kind of mysterious moral change in those who are subject to it, not merely destroying

Lean'd ever on their God for perfect strength.' (Book XII, l. 566-569).

<sup>73</sup>Robert Baxter (1802-1889) was a former Irvingite who had published an account of his decision to cease to be a 'prophet', taken during the controversies of the 1830s; Stunt, T. C. F., 'Baxter, Robert Dudley' in D. M. Lewis (ed.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford, 1995), p. 69.

<sup>74</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to the Evangelical Alliance Council, recorded in the Executive Council Minutes, 25 November, 1869.

<sup>75</sup>Evangelical Alliance, Executive Council Minutes, 12 January, 1870.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 30 March, 1870.

'Satan's works' but also changing his character, then that amounted to virtual universalism - if the hearts of sinners were subject to Christ, as the doctrine of passive contemplation would have them be, then eternal punishment would be a monstrosity as God would be for ever punishing those who had been brought into heartfelt subjection to his will.<sup>77</sup>

Yet Birks still explicitly denied that there was Scriptural warrant for any possible extension of the time of grace and probation beyond the mortal life. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus also seemed to yield 'a clear presumption against any passage after death across that chasm which separates the believing and penitent from the unbelieving'.<sup>78</sup>

The eternity of post-mortem punishment was a just response to the conscious rejection of the Gospel. Nonetheless, Birks believed that Scripture did not teach that the punishment of the unfaithful was

only penal and has nothing of the remedial or corrective character; on the contrary, it is plainly taught that this fire of the great judgement will also have the character of an anti-septic, an antidote to the corrupting tendencies of moral evil in the creature when not restrained by the hand of the righteous Judge.<sup>79</sup>

Hence the eventual submission of the unregenerate brought with it some form of mysterious divine influence that could comfort them in their plight, though they remained always excluded from the blessings of the righteous. Indeed, Birks was very concerned to emphasize the qualitative nature of the punishment of the wicked, as the absence of personal communion with God.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Quoted in Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement: a reply to Dr. Candlish's Inaugural Lecture; with a brief statement of facts in connection with the Evangelical Alliance* (London, 1870), p. 5.

<sup>78</sup>Birks, T. R., *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (Cambridge, 1870; second edition, 1878), pp. 424-425.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>80</sup>The 'most essential' feature of eternal punishment was 'the conception of an irreparable, irreversible loss of a privilege now attainable; and when the door has been shut, never after to be attained' (Birks, T. R., 'Future Punishment', *Contemporary Review*, vol. 32, May 1878, p. 375).

### Conclusion

Birks defended the vital importance of the atonement, but his approach was markedly different from the crude legalism of conventional Evangelical apologetics. Like F. D. Maurice, Birks sought to emphasize the dual aspect of atonement as, in Reardon's phrase, an act directed 'both Godward and manward'.<sup>81</sup>

Birks also rejected the conventional legalistic understanding of the doctrine of justification. He believed that justification was not merely wholly imputed and external, on conversion, but also involved a personal growth in holiness following conversion. Birks's emphasis upon the idea that God's 'acceptance of his people has reference to the whole work of the new creation in their hearts' may thus be seen to anticipate some aspects of the later nineteenth-century holiness movement.<sup>82</sup>

Birks, again like Maurice, was concerned to emphasize the recovery of a broad Biblical perspective, putting New Testament ideas on doctrines like hell into a broader Scriptural context, centred firmly on the person of Christ.<sup>83</sup> He sought to develop, from an Evangelical perspective, a theology accommodating the renewed prominence being given in contemporary thought to the incarnation of Christ and to 'that love of God which is the very heart and life of the Gospel'.<sup>84</sup>

Birks felt that he had formulated a 'true *Via Media*' between 'Universalism and an immoral Fatalism'.<sup>85</sup> Salvation, he believed, resulted not

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<sup>81</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>82</sup>Birks, T. R., *Justification and Imputed Righteousness*, p. 7. The holiness movement is discussed in Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 151-180.

<sup>83</sup>E. H. Plumptre, Dean of Wells, commented that Birks's *Victory of Divine Goodness* 'In not a few passages ... presents so close a verbal identity with Mr. Maurice's *Theological Essays*, that in a writer of inferior calibre it would suggest the thought of literary plagiarism'; Plumptre, E. H., *The Spirits in Prison and other studies on the Life after Death* (London, 1885), p. 229.

<sup>84</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Atonement and the Judgement*, p. 32.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.



simply from the fact of the atonement, 'but from its special application by personal faith', and divine punishment, 'however severe and solemn', did not 'exclude its objects from some possible and real manifestation of the Divine goodness'.<sup>86</sup>

Birks argued that Scripture, from paradise to the second advent, revealed that the entire human race 'has been placed under an economy of redeeming love'. Those who, by continued rebellion and persevering sin, have forfeited the full redemption offered by life in Christ still partake in the bodily resurrection and are freed from committing further sin, though their will is not freely and spontaneously but 'through punishment and humiliation alone, brought into subjection to the supreme and perfect goodness'.<sup>87</sup> All who were to be judged shared a common divine 'sonship by creation'. They also shared in the common headship of the race as while Christ was 'pre-eminently the Brother of the righteous', he was also 'the Brother of the prodigals' who 'have forsaken their Father's house' and thus 'the Judge, who is the Son of Man, will not forget or overlook the annulled relation of brotherhood'.<sup>88</sup> Those who

receive either few or many stripes from the Son of Man when He sits on the throne of judgement, are still by the voice of the supreme Lawgiver included in the vast fraternity of the human race, and within the range of the law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".<sup>89</sup>

Birks's doctrine of passive contemplation reflected this conception of the common brotherhood of the lost and the blessed. The passive contemplation by the unregenerate of the goodness of God, Birks maintained, was no more difficult

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<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>87</sup>Birks, T. R., *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (second edition, 1878), p. 426.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 429.

to accept than a belief in the coexistence of both perfect mercy and perfect justice in God.<sup>90</sup> This, in combination with the righteousness of divine punishment, made abhorrent any notion of souls being given into the power of Satan to be perpetually tormented or to torment each other. That

death and hell should be cast into the lake of fire, is a work of redemption, a triumph of divine love.<sup>91</sup>

More conventionally orthodox Evangelicals, like E. A. Litton, had continued to emphasize the separation of the blessed and the lost, rather than their union, maintaining that the 'great gulf fixed' was the purpose of divine judgement and the basis of God's providential plan for the future state of mankind.<sup>92</sup> R. B. Girdlestone also held fast to a traditional view of hell as a state of 'ruin and utter degradation, not remedial chastisement, but endless woe'. He reconciled this with the notion of a God of love by arguing that love was an attribute of God manifested in the *redemption of the world* through his Son but that this attribute could not be seen in isolation from God's other Scriptural attributes, like justice and retribution. The only ground for pardon from divine justice was Christ's atonement and if man refuses that then he has no hope of mercy or pity.<sup>93</sup>

Nonetheless, Birks's abandonment of the idea of a literal hell, with devils tormenting men who continue to blaspheme God forever, in favour of sinful rebellion being eternally silenced, left room for a growing number of

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<sup>90</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, p. 187.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>92</sup>Culbertson, E. M., *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>93</sup>Girdlestone, R. B., *Dies Irae: The Final Judgement and Future Prospects of Mankind* (London, 1877), p. 172 ff. Such orthodox views also appear to have remained central to the work and vocation of the missionaries of the C. M. S. amongst the 'perishing heathen' well into the 1880s; Hatcher, B. A., 'Eternal Punishment and Christian Missions: The Response of the Church Missionary Society to Broad Church Theology', *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. LXXII, no. 1, 1990, pp. 56-61.

Evangelicals, later in the nineteenth century, to teach the alleviation of the sufferings of the lost, or their extinction, as a fitter alternative to eternal punishment. E. H. Bickersteth's *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever*, for example, reflects the influence of Birks's views. Culbertson has stated that Birks's views on the future life had changed in the 1860s, influenced by Bickersteth's poetry.<sup>94</sup> Yet Birks's own accounts of his beliefs, in *The Victory of Divine Goodness* and *The Atonement and the Judgement*, clearly affirm the originality of his views and their relationship to his own detailed prophetic studies during his years at Watton, when the young E. H. Bickersteth was Birks's pupil.<sup>95</sup>

Bickersteth's poem dispenses with perpetual demonic torments in hell, in favour of sinful rebellion being eternally silenced, and depicts the lost as acknowledging the righteousness of their punishment.<sup>96</sup> It also describes the 'limitless' increase in generations of the blessed on the new earth following the last judgement<sup>97</sup> and their subsequent colonization of other planets.<sup>98</sup>

It is also important to note that even those Evangelicals, like Birks, who had begun to reinterpret the orthodox doctrine of the future life still retained a belief in some form of eternal punishment for the lost. E. H. Bickersteth, for

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<sup>94</sup>Culbertson, E. M., *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>95</sup>The obituarist of the *Record* confirms that Birks's views originated in the early 1840s. In addition, Birks's widow also denied claims in some newspaper articles published after his death stating that his views on this subject had changed in later years. In a footnote to a republished sermon on the 'Rejection of the Gospel', she wrote: 'It is, therefore, necessary once more to affirm in this place, that the teaching contained in this Sermon' [originally published in 1845] 'was his teaching to the end of his life'; Birks, G. A., note in Birks, T. R., *Farewell Sermons. Preached in the parish church of Watton, Herts.* (London, 1883), p. 156. Birks's earlier publications relating to this topic have been discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>96</sup>Bickersteth, E. H., *Yesterday, To-Day and Forever* (London, 1866); Sinful rebellion is portrayed as silenced in Book III, l. 592-593 and the wicked accepting the righteousness of their punishment in Book XI, l. 662-679. Satan is also given a final soliloquy in which he acknowledges the goodness restraining him from further 'suicidal wickedness' and the infinite mercy providing glimpses of the 'beauty of holiness' (Book XI, l. 944-987).

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, Book XII, l. 599-602. Bickersteth cited Birks's *Outlines of Unfulfilled Prophecy* (London, 1854) in the note on this section of the poem (p. 447).

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, Book XII, l. 602-633; cf. chapter 6.

instance, reflected in 1878 that after 'twenty years of thought and prayer, I must solemnly believe in eternal punishment, but in what it consists is the question'.<sup>99</sup>

Birks and Bickersteth tended to emphasize the Scripture testimony to the effect that while God had declared the punishment of the lost to be everlasting, his punishment was an act of mercy rather than vengeful justice and, both by its nature and degree, was regulated by the strictest justice and most persevering divine love. Samuel Garratt, who was also a close associate of Birks, went further, stating explicitly what Birks's critics in the Evangelical Alliance had earlier accused him of implying. He maintained that the fate of the wicked involved the loss of the inheritance of the saints and the eternal shame of that loss but, because willing submission to a just punishment can bring its own 'relative blessing', their punishment was also intended to become the means of their moral reformation. It was, perhaps, necessary to bring them within the ministrations of the risen saints, who would continue their ministry after the resurrection to deliver the universe from sin, and to give them some hope of final salvation.<sup>100</sup>

The debates concerning the future life within Anglican Evangelicalism were, as this chapter has demonstrated, not merely reactions to the publications of 'liberal' theologians, but clearly reflect the longer-term theological and spiritual legacy of Irving's preaching of the premillennial advent. Literalist readings of the Book of Revelation had naturally fed into new interpretations of the doctrines of divine judgement and salvation.

Birks's interpretation of the atonement also embodied Irving's conception of Christ's divine headship of all humanity. Birks, like Irving, emphasized that the incarnation was a manifestation of divine love to all men rather than a crude sacrifice to appease divine wrath. He insisted that the love of the Father preceded

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<sup>99</sup>Quoted in Aglionby, F. K., *The Life of Edward Henry Bickersteth, bishop and poet* (London, 1907), p. 36.

<sup>100</sup>Garratt, E. R. (ed.), *Life and Personal Recollections of Samuel Garratt* (London, 1908), pp. 79-83.

and introduced the redeeming grace of the Son. The atonement was, therefore, not only a ransom, but also a 'moral magnet' and could only operate through a personal faith in the incarnation of Christ.

## CHAPTER X

### **The Bible: inspiration and revelation**

It was a prime concern of Evangelicals to defend the special status of the Bible as an inspired revelation and the only rule of faith. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Biblical criticism appeared to be undermining their traditional assumptions concerning the historical accuracy of Scripture and was also leading Evangelicals to consider more deeply the precise nature of Biblical inspiration. Moreover, the historical criticism of Strauss had focused on the element of myth that was at the centre of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus and, as the 'supernatural' passages of the Gospel had served as the dogmatic foundation for orthodox christology, the concentration of scholars on historical and literary issues inevitably also raised theological and doctrinal issues.

Indeed, the most radical forms of higher criticism raised the vital question of whether Christianity itself was human or divine. Hence the status of the Bible as a supernatural revelation, the nature of its inspiration and the credibility of the Christian faith were perceived to be closely related and under sustained attack in the debates of the 1860s. This chapter analyses the nature and significance of Birks's role in defending these principles. It also considers Birks's output in its broader intellectual and cultural context.

It has often been assumed that, for early nineteenth-century Evangelicals, the Bible was believed to be verbally inspired in the sense that every statement in it was divinely authorised and, therefore, essentially inerrant.<sup>1</sup> Bebbington, by contrast, has argued that Evangelicals only began to articulate an emotional allegiance to a doctrine of infallible verbal inspiration from the middle decades of the nineteenth century, in response to the new intellectual and theological challenges that they faced during this period.<sup>2</sup>

Birks's early career demonstrates that a relatively flexible view of plenary inspiration did continue to be prominent in Evangelical thought.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note, however, that this approach set Birks apart from most of the 'Recordite' Evangelicals who, influenced by Robert Haldane, had, from the 1820s, begun to adopt theories of verbal inspiration, with a concomitant emphasis on a narrower literalism of Scriptural interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Biblical inspiration continued to be a pivotal issue in the bitter theological controversies of the 1860s. Most of the liberal Anglican contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), for example, had denied even plenary inspiration and maintained that divine inspiration applied only to those parts of Scripture that conveyed a specific religious message. Jowett's notorious essay, 'On The Interpretation of Scripture', had been understood to imply that the factual and historical content of the sacred texts were far less significant than their inherent moral and spiritual values, which modern readers were better equipped to understand than their original authors and contemporary audience.

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<sup>1</sup>Reardon, B. M. G., *From Coleridge to Gore, A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (London, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp. 143-147.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup>Rennie, I. S., 'Verbal Inspiration' in Elwell, W. A. (ed.), *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (London, 1993).

H. B. Wilson had also denied that the Biblical accounts of incidents like the transfiguration and the opening of the eyes of the blind were to be taken literally, declaring that the gospels were not perfectly genuine and authentic. He argued that the sixth Article did not affirm the miraculous inspiration of Scripture and that none of the Scriptural authors applied the phrase 'Word of God' to the books of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup> Wilson's denial of the historical veracity of the Bible historians undermined traditional assumptions concerning their special inspiration and the implicit belief in their infallibility as messengers from God. During the subsequent heresy trial of the Essayists Williams and Wilson, their defence counsel Fitzjames Stephen specifically upheld the idea that the Bible was not in itself the 'Word of God', but contained divine truths.<sup>6</sup>

The phrase 'Word of God' had been, by tradition, highly evocative for Evangelicals. It was of central importance in their preaching and devotional life, and was a concept which ordinary clergy readily understood. The 'Oxford Declaration' of 1864 condemning *Essays and Reviews*, supported by almost half of the ordained Anglican clergy, strongly reaffirmed a belief 'without reserve or qualification' in 'the plenary Inspiration and Authority of the whole Canonical Scriptures as the Word of God'.<sup>7</sup>

The work of the Essayists was thus seen by their Evangelical critics as subverting traditional Christian faith, emptying the Scriptures of their force and practical efficacy by denying the historical nature of the Biblical narratives. Jowett's essay, in particular, appeared to many contemporary observers to mark a clear tendency to resolve Christianity into merely a series of noble ideas and a

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<sup>5</sup>Wilson, H. B., 'The National Church' in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), p. 175.

<sup>6</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Responses to Essays and Reviews, 1860-1864', in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, vol. iv; Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Altholz, J. L., *op. cit.*, p. 33.



moral way of life. Birks declared that the one of the 'most ominous signs of the times' was the 'publication of the recent volume of Essays and Reviews, which have startled thousands into the conviction that a widespread apostasy from the truth among intellectual men is near at hand, if not already begun'.<sup>8</sup>

### Scriptural Inspiration and Authority

In Birks's opinion, a belief in the literal verbal inspiration of Scripture had been relatively rare in recent years, but he recognized it as a danger in 'popular Christianity' when 'traditional orthodoxy' and 'spiritual idleness' came together.<sup>9</sup> Birks contended that even when, as in the case of prophetic messengers, the Spirit had 'guided their human faculties, as the horse is guided by its rider' they were 'not passive, unconscious instruments. Their natural gifts and powers were used, not superseded or extinguished, in the messages they were chosen to convey'.<sup>10</sup>

Birks argued, as indeed the Essayist Wilson had done, that the human element in Scripture was an 'integral part' of the true doctrine of inspiration and must be freely admitted before the divine truth could be recognized. Indeed, Birks declared, 'we cannot apprehend the Divine elements, except through the human'. Knowledge of God was only achievable by 'sympathy with the thoughts, feelings and testimonies of the sacred writers in order to 'rise into fellowship with that Spirit by whom they spoke'.<sup>11</sup> Inspiration was the result of the action of the Spirit on a messenger but did not create artificial rules of construction or prevent the writer from adopting the usual latitude in the way truth was conveyed between men. Metaphors 'are still metaphors, and round numbers are round numbers',

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<sup>8</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, 14 January 1861.

<sup>9</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought* (London, 1861; second edition, 1862), p. 263.

<sup>10</sup>Birks, T. R., *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (Cambridge, 1870; second edition, 1878), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 264.

while records of speeches 'have the same liberty of condensation or selection, in contrast to mere verbal facsimiles, which belongs to similar cases in purely human writings'.<sup>12</sup> Equally due attention must be paid to the place, times and circumstances in which the sacred writers worked and the language they used 'must be understood according to its use in the days when the writer lived, so far as this can be ascertained'.<sup>13</sup>

Birks was also willing to make limited concessions to historical criticism, but only in so far as to illuminate discrepancies and mistranslations in holy texts.<sup>14</sup> He was, however, unprepared to accept the type of higher criticism liable to suggest possible errors in the Scriptural message itself.<sup>15</sup>

The Essayist Temple had grounded the Christian faith in the prior religious sense of man and argued that the Bible was not an outer law but a history of religious life whose purpose was 'not to override' but to 'evoke' conscience.<sup>16</sup> For Birks, Temple's line of reasoning suggested that Scripture had no objective authority and could impose no obligations unless endorsed by an individual's conscience. Hence Temple's essay appeared to bring into question the fundamental Evangelical belief in a church and world under divine moral government, raising the threat of spiritual and moral anarchy if no laws were binding upon believers except those which they themselves chose to obey.<sup>17</sup> In response, Birks defended the authority of the Bible as a Revelation from God that demanded obedience simply by virtue of its divine origin. The commands of Scripture were binding by their own authority as words of God, spoken by Christ and his Apostles, and the moral precepts of the Bible must simply be received by

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>16</sup>Temple, F., 'The Education of the World', in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), p. 44.

<sup>17</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 354.

the conscience at once, in so far as they were understood, and accepted as obligatory.<sup>18</sup>

### Old Testament Criticism

Bishop Colenso's *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (London, 1862) studied a series of mathematical inaccuracies in Scriptural texts to prove that the Old Testament could not be literally the Word of God. The extent of Colenso's criticism and his bluntness of tone had shocked even prominent 'liberal' Anglicans like F. D. Maurice.<sup>19</sup>

Colenso's critical studies of the Pentateuch had raised the issue of the historical credibility of the particular Old Testament books from which the entire orthodox scheme of salvation and redemption had been derived. In particular, the belief in salvation through Christ's atoning sacrifice, the fundamental Evangelical doctrine, was perceived to have rested upon St. Paul's interpretation of the Pentateuch. As Alexander McCaul observed, the 'whole system of New Testament doctrine concerning salvation, the guilt of man, the curse of the Law, and redemption by the blood of Christ, rests upon the supposition that the Law is a Divine Revelation'.<sup>20</sup>

Colenso's work had also intensified the whole mid-Victorian debate surrounding traditional faith in the person of Christ and his divinity. He had openly 'spoken out' what other Broad Churchmen, who had previously welcomed critical reconstructions of the historical figure of Jesus, had only 'been mumbling

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 354-363.

<sup>19</sup>Hinchliff, P., 'Ethics, Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the thought of Benjamin Jowett and John William Colenso', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 1986, pp. 103-105.

<sup>20</sup>McCaul, A., *An Examination of Bishop Colenso's Difficulties with regard to the Pentateuch; and some reasons for believing its authenticity and divine origin* (London, 1864), p. 290. McCaul (1799 - 1863) was professor of Hebrew at King's College, London, and a member of the committee of convocation established to consider Colenso's works on the Old Testament.

in dark sentences'.<sup>21</sup> By asserting, in his 'Preface', that Jesus must have either been mistaken or ignorant as to the age and authorship of the Pentateuch, it was inferred, by his Evangelical critics, that Colenso had come close to promoting the Nestorian heresy of denying that the Godhead and manhood were in one person. Christian believers could not, therefore, reject the Pentateuch, as Colenso advocated, 'without renouncing' all faith in their Saviour because Jesus had made an 'indissoluble connection' between faith in the Pentateuch and faith in himself.<sup>22</sup>

Birks argued that much of Colenso's criticism resulted from his having made false assumptions and adopted superficial interpretations. Colenso's objections to the feasibility of the duties of the priests in Leviticus, for instance, were based on the assumption that the laws were intended to be observed in the wilderness. Birks maintained that there was no Scriptural warrant for this view and cited St. Stephen's account (Acts VII., 42 - 43) describing the sinful neglect of such duties in this period - the prescribed laws were actually not meant to be upheld until the arrival in the promised land and could only apply in those circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

Birks was forced to concede that it was not possible to answer all of Colenso's 'difficulties' with the Old Testament histories such as his objection to the account of two million Israelites having crossed the Red Sea in a single night. Colenso, in such cases, was felt to have ignored the weight of internal Scriptural evidence of direct divine intervention in history.

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<sup>21</sup> McCaul, A., *An Examination of Bishop Colenso's Difficulties.*, p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215-6.

<sup>23</sup> Birks, T. R., *The Exodus of Israel: its difficulties examined, and its truth confirmed: with a reply to recent objections* (London, 1863), pp. 167-168. Rev. E. Garbett had read a 'highly satisfactory' report on this work at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Religious Tract Society, proposing its adoption and publication by the society; Religious Tract Society, Executive Council minutes, 27 January, 1863, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

In discussing the vast increase in the Israelite population from the Descent to the birth of Moses, for example, Birks calculated that, if a generation was understood to refer to a mean average lifetime of seventy years - rather than descents from father to son as in Colenso's calculations - as St. Paul implied (Gal. III, 17), then over four generations there must have been an annual population increase of 4.75%. This compared with an average increase in the British population during the first half of the nineteenth century of 2% per annum.<sup>24</sup> Hence the only historical anomaly in the text concerned was the continuation of this unusual fertility rate which, occurring as it did at the time of the Exodus, 'was a signal and manifest token of the peculiar blessing of God upon the chosen people'.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in discussing Colenso's moral and historical objections to the account of the war with Midian, which recorded no Israelite casualties and the wholesale slaughter of captives including women and children, Birks claimed that events which would undermine the credibility of a secular history were not improbable or unacceptable in a historical account of Divine Providence. In this context, the war had been a 'judicial act, the execution, by Divine command, of God's own sentence on iniquity'.<sup>26</sup>

In the first gospel Christ himself had confirmed the divine inspiration and authority of the Pentateuch, answering Satanic temptation with a succession of quotations drawn from the closing portion of the book of Deuteronomy, which included one from that chapter 'most offensive in the eyes of a self-sufficient and sentimental theology' describing the divine judgement passed on the people of Canaan.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the first lesson Christ impressed on his disciples had been

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 27-46.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

to have faith in the divine authority of the law and the 'truth and inspiration of the Books of Moses is thus made ... the basis and starting-point of the Gospel'.<sup>28</sup>

Christ had treated the law as a Divine revelation, given to Moses, authentic in its account of the miraculous and supernatural, possessing a divine authority that was binding upon the Jewish people. Birks regarded Christ's testimony as a complete refutation of the 'theory of an intermittent, mongrel, and imperfect inspiration, which leaves part of the contents of the Old Testament to be Divine, and other parts to be the mistaken words of fallible men'.<sup>29</sup>

### Miracles

Evidential theology was also being challenged by contemporary developments in Biblical criticism. Attacks on evidential theology presented a particular challenge to Evangelicals who had been, Altholz argues, strongly committed to evidential theology to add weight to what was otherwise an essentially subjective faith.<sup>30</sup>

D. F. Strauss's *Leben Jesu*, appearing in a translation by George Eliot (1846), had maintained that the miraculous had been introduced into the Gospel narratives not from an intention to deceive but because early Christians had viewed Christ with messianic expectations. Similarly, among the contributors to *Essays and Reviews*, Baden Powell had rejected miracles and Williams denied the predictive character of Old Testament prophecy - both of which had been central elements of the conventional Paleyan defence of the evidential truth of Christianity.

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>29</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 205 ff.

<sup>30</sup>Altholz, J. L., 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Responses to 'Essays and Reviews', 1860-1864' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume IV, Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988), p. 35.

Birks sought to refute Baden Powell's contention that Biblical miracles must be tested by the criteria of modern science and that they were simply incredible if judged by that criteria. He began by stating that Baden Powell's reasoning, like that of many contemporary scientists, was based on a false premise; that the Christian records contained no special feature justifying a departure from the incredulity that strange events would receive in the present scientific age - they were a professed message from God and that made them exceptional. Birks went on to propose that it would, in fact, be preposterous for a supposed message from God not to affirm its divine origin and to have no 'signs', 'wonders' and prophecies to testify to its authenticity.<sup>31</sup>

Birks declared that if every part of the Bible's message had to be weighed in terms of its historical accuracy, the soundness of its doctrine and its morals, like any other ancient text, then 'Miraculous attestations to such a message' would necessarily be a 'ridiculous superfluity' as readers would be unable to determine which parts of the text they were meant to attest to.<sup>32</sup>

Birks maintained, therefore, that either all or none of the Biblical message had supernatural evidence and authority. Moreover, he insisted, it was the appeal to the fulfilment of prophecy and divine miracles that formed the basis of the claim of Jesus to be the true Messiah and of the Gospel to be believed as the Word of God. Hence, Birks argued, that Christianity must either 'stand or fall' with the acceptance or rejection of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the life, death and miraculous resurrection of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Birks denied, however, that miracles could be defined as direct and immediate acts of Divine power that broke or reversed natural laws - by such a

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<sup>31</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, pp. 70-1.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 155.

definition it would almost be impossible to decide when a miracle had actually occurred as no man knows all the laws of nature or the possible results of their combination.<sup>34</sup> He defined a miracle as 'an unusual event or prodigy, of which no adequate physical cause is known, and yet connected with some evident moral purpose, which may claim to be accepted for the principal cause on which its occurrence depends'.<sup>35</sup>

Birks also rejected Baden Powell's conception of natural law as being, by definition, necessary and unalterable, maintaining that scientific laws were merely 'provisional' hypotheses based on currently known facts and that the possibility of other, contradictory, facts was always conceivable. Moreover, like some agnostic scientists, Baden Powell had attempted to argue, on the one hand, that nothing could be known except fixed laws that were summations of known facts but, on the other hand, when discussing miracles, reversing his reasoning and treating the same laws like 'real causes, inflexible and unalterable' admitting 'neither God, nor angel, nor man, to interfere with their *absolute and supreme* dominion'.<sup>36</sup>

Birks disputed Powell's contention that the notion of constant divine interference discredited our ideas of Divine omnipotence and perfection. Biblical miracles were not arbitrary disruptions of the natural order but purposive suspensions of the known law. He used the analogy of the physical law of gravity stating that all bodies fall to earth and yet wood floats on water and balloons rise into the air. Hence lower physical laws can be intersected and reversed by others and can, in the same way, be 'suspended and reversed' by spiritual agency.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Ways of God* (London, 1863), p. 50.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 71.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70.



On this basis, Birks argued, it was possible to believe, on credible testimony, in the miraculous suspension of this type of provisional law either by the 'intersection' of some higher, as yet unknown law, or by the direct intervention of a supernatural agency.<sup>38</sup> The strength and validity of the miraculous evidence of a divine revelation then depended upon the greatness of the miraculous events themselves and the moral features of the revealed message to which they attested when viewed as a whole.

Christ had claimed the rank and character of the true Messiah by having worked greater miracles than any of the prophets and His great Biblical miracles, like the feeding of the five thousand, were not affected in their evidential power by modern scientific discoveries. Such miracles agreed in their character as the credentials to a series of divine revelations, having a consistent plan and moral purpose, and provided 'complete and decisive evidence' that Christ's teaching was 'from God and truly Divine'.<sup>39</sup>

### Progress

Liberal theologians were tending to regard the whole of world history as the object of revelation. God revealed himself in the universal evolution of Spirit, or the gradual disclosure of the immanent Trinity, and the Bible was not itself revelation, but a record of the human response to revelation.<sup>40</sup>

Temple's essay had argued that man's religious awareness had developed progressively as history evolved.<sup>41</sup> Temple maintained that, as a result, nineteenth-century man was living in the most religious age ever and, possessing

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>40</sup>Ellis, I., 'The Intellectual Challenge to "Official Religion"' in Thomas, D. A. T. (ed.), *The British, their religious beliefs and practices, 1800-1986* (London, 1988), p. 53.

<sup>41</sup>Temple, F., 'The Education of the World' in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), pp. 6-34.

a new theology for a new era, he was now able to judge past ages of religion like the age of the Old Testament.<sup>42</sup> Temple's concept of linear spiritual progress thus presented a view of Divine Providence that saw it simply in terms of a scheme for the world's education, thereby appearing to deny the fall of man and, by consequence, his need for divine redemption. Evangelical critics also felt that Temple's belief that 'natural' religions were a part of divine revelation presented a direct challenge to their support for overseas missions.<sup>43</sup>

Birks responded by arguing that, in fact, the Bible, rather than presenting a history revealing the working of a 'natural law of human progress', depicted a series of rebellions, periods of irreligion and direct interpositions in the history of a rebellious race by 'gracious acts of the Holy Spirit, or direct judgements of Christ'.<sup>44</sup> However, the Bible did, for Birks, exhibit progress of a different kind - the unfolding of a scheme of Divine mercy for the redemption and recovery of fallen man as the providence of God revealed itself from age to age in new acts of judgement and mercy. Scripture revealed a double progress: of the moral government of the world and of the message of revelation, together with the actual fruits of redemption in successive ages.<sup>45</sup>

### Supernatural Revelation

Williams's essay had argued that Bunsen's researches confirmed the liberal criticism which traced revelation historically, bringing Scripture within the sphere of nature and denying or appearing to deny the supernatural.<sup>46</sup> Birks

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<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>43</sup>Hardman, B. E., 'The Evangelical Party in the Church of England, 1855-1865', PhD. thesis, Cambridge 1963, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 430.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 430-431.

<sup>46</sup>Williams, R., 'Bunsen's Biblical Researches' in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), pp. 50-93. In German liberal schools the conception of a transcendent creator, who intervenes from without, had been superseded by the view that God was immanent in all things and so no distinction could be made between the

claimed that this essay was the most 'offensive' and 'dangerous' of the seven as there was 'perhaps no essay in the volume which does so much to undermine and destroy the whole edifice of the Christian faith, or which would hurry those who accept its conclusions so far on the road to utter infidelity'.<sup>47</sup>

Birks countered Williams's argument by simply maintaining that the 'essence' of Christianity was its claim, articulated by Jesus and his Apostles, to have a supernatural and divine authority, running through the New Testament, which 'coheres inseparably with its historical narrative, its doctrinal teaching and practical exhortations'.<sup>48</sup>

However, many orthodox Christian intellectuals had recently begun to base their defence of supernatural revelation upon the arguments advanced by the Oxford High Church Tory H. L. Mansel (1820 - 1871) in his famous Bampton Lectures entitled *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined* (1858). Mansel had aimed to refute Hegelian philosophy and the results of German criticism by demonstrating the necessary limitations upon the construction of a philosophical theology, based on the constitution of the human mind.<sup>49</sup>

Mansel denied that human beings possess any direct faculty by which, independently of all external revelation, they can judge of the nature of God, or assess the claims of any professed revelation to contain a true representation of the Divine nature and attributes. His conclusion was that, because they cannot know the infinite, they cannot adequately test the claims of any supposed revelation. As a result, the whole of Christian Revelation had to be received

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natural and supernatural. Schleiermacher, for instance, had claimed that miracle was 'simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle, as soon as the religious view of it can be dominant. To me all is miracle' (*On Religion*, quoted in Sell, A. P. F., *Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1986), p. 18.

<sup>47</sup>Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, 14 January 1861.

<sup>48</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 46-47.

<sup>49</sup>Cupitt, Don., 'Mansel and Maurice on our Knowledge of God', *Theology*, 73, 1970, pp. 306-307.

merely on authority as human faculties are not capable of estimating the virtue or wisdom of particular doctrines in Scripture and the Bible cannot be examined on its contents but only on the evidences of its divine origin.<sup>50</sup>

Mansel's lectures were widely held, at the time of their publication, to have been an intellectual triumph and were largely welcomed by orthodox believers, helping to bolster their confidence in evidential theology at a time of intense controversy and crisis.<sup>51</sup> Birks, however, felt that the argument put forward by Mansel was self-contradictory and contained greater error than the Continental rationalist philosophy he had been attempting to refute. His central assumption, that reason cannot be exercised at all concerning the attributes of God, would, Birks argued, merely serve to undermine the foundations of all religion, natural and revealed. If nothing at all could really be known of the nature and character of God then 'all revelation is impossible'.<sup>52</sup>

Mansel's denial that even a partial knowledge of an infinite God was possible contradicted the 'whole tenor' of the Gospel and struck at the root of all religious faith. Birks maintained that the very use of terms like 'infinite' to describe God necessarily denoted a being contrasting in his essential character with the countless finite beings observed in daily life and, therefore, at least a limited knowledge of the absolute and infinite was 'implied in the very use of the terms alone; and when it is denied, they become wholly unmeaning'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Birks argued, knowledge of God, through the person of Jesus, was the

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<sup>50</sup>Cupitt, Don., 'Mansel's theory of regulative truth', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 18, 1967, p. 124.

<sup>51</sup>In the heat of the controversy following the publication of *Essays and Reviews* many conservative Evangelical and High Church Anglicans relied on Mansel's argument to evade the difficult issues raised by continental Biblical criticism: Altholz, *op. cit.*, pp. 37 - 40.

<sup>52</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 455.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 456.

accompaniment to salvation, constituting the eternal life of the soul, and the essential object of Revelation was to convey this message.<sup>54</sup>

The controversies surrounding the nature and meaning of Revelation continued, as the nineteenth century progressed, and were given added momentum by the appearance of the anonymously published *Supernatural Religion* (1874) in which, with a slender basis in Tübingen theology, W. R. Cassels had sought to eliminate the supernatural element in religion.<sup>55</sup> This work advocated a non-miraculous Christianity, based on the teaching of Jesus, stripped of its Pauline interpretations, and strongly criticised the defences of supernatural miracles by J. B. Mozley and Mansel.

It effectively turned Mansel's famous argument on its head, arguing that the proper subject of a supernatural revelation could only be to impart truths beyond human reason and which the human intellect could not have discovered by any other means. If supernatural truth was beyond human reason then any appeal to reason in order to confirm the divine origin of a message which signs and wonders were insufficient to prove was, in fact, impossible because it was self-evident that human reason could not prove that which lay beyond reason.

Birks's response was to concede that Revelation was beyond reason, in the sense that no process of abstract reasoning could have discovered it. The life and acts of Jesus now called upon human 'reason to exercise itself on a wider range of facts' which are unlike any previous experience and hence supernatural. Although related to what had previously been known - the purposive design evident in the natural world - they now provided new knowledge of the character and purposes of the Creator.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 456-457.

<sup>55</sup>Andrews, J. S., 'German influence on English religious life in the Victorian era', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 44, 1972, p. 227.

<sup>56</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation, or, First Principles of Moral Theology* (London, 1879), pp. 44-47.

## Conclusion

Birks's view of Biblical inspiration involved an appeal to reason, reflecting the continuing and pervasive influence of Enlightenment thought upon Evangelicalism. Birks began with the *a priori* argument that the professed purpose of a wise God, in conveying a message to mankind, in itself constituted a pledge of the authority of Scripture.

It follows that an all-powerful God would, when seeking permanently to establish a revelation of truth for all time, choose a method of doing so which would not give rise to it being transmitted in a way allowing excessive human infirmity, moral imperfection and historical inaccuracy to give rise to a mass of error and falsehood. Christ's clear promise of the truthful guidance of the Spirit to his Apostles lost all practical meaning if the Spirit had left them to include an indefinite amount of human error in their writings.<sup>57</sup>

While the Bible did, as Jowett, maintained, resemble other books in being the work of a diversity of human authors, Birks pointed to the clear claim of St. Paul that the word must not be received as the word of man but as the Word of God. The Bible, though written at different times and by different persons, had a higher unity of plan, outline and moral purpose that constituted the 'proof of design' and 'higher wisdom' in its inspiration.

The diversity of Scriptural miracles agreed in their character as evidence of a true revelation and reflected a consistent divine plan and moral purpose - the providential action needed to redeem fallen man. This included events like the massacre of Canaanites, criticized as morally repugnant by writers like Francis

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<sup>57</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, pp. 203-330.

Newman and Colenso, which Birks continued to regard as righteous punishments for sin.

Birks's treatment of the work of critics like Colenso can be seen to reflect his earlier restatement of the 'evidences' of Christianity.<sup>58</sup> Colenso had, according to Birks, neglected the nature and extent of the testimony to divine intervention in the natural world - this, together with the personal authority of Jesus, was, he believed, evidence which compelled modern readers to accept even the harshest of Old Testament judgements.

Similarly, the Essayists, by effectively eliminating from Christianity those supernatural elements apparently not in accordance with modern knowledge and sensibilities, were, Birks maintained, arbitrarily separating into two parts a message attested to as a whole. Such an approach, Birks declared, 'exposes those who practise it to the charge of irrational superstition in what they retain, on evidence which the very separation would prove worthless, or else of profaneness and unbelief as to the parts which they reject'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>See chapter 6.

<sup>59</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, p. 8.

## CHAPTER XI

### **Theology and natural science**

There was, by the mid-nineteenth century, a widespread acceptance that the primary purpose of Scripture was not to teach science. Scientists, according to Sedgwick, were not obliged to take matters like Scriptural time-spans literally - the Bible was concerned with man's moral and spiritual destiny and, as long as science did not impinge on that, it had a free reign.<sup>1</sup> Yet new discoveries in the geological and biological sciences were increasingly being perceived as challenging both the traditional views of man's place in the universe and the scope of Providential intervention in the natural world. Darwinian evolution was perceived to be a threat to creationism and the Christian doctrine of man and his destiny; it even appeared to exclude all first causes, the supernatural and God from the known natural world.

This chapter presents an analysis of the arguments used by Birks to defend an essentially supernaturalist view of Christianity, relating them to the broader

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<sup>1</sup>Lyell's geology had severely weakened the intellectual credibility of the Universal Flood among scientifically informed opinion and the leading Cambridge scientists Sedgwick and Whewell allowed for considerable flexibility in interpreting Genesis - a literalist interpretation of the text was not at issue, but both men were very much concerned to gloss Lyell's theories in a way that still left room for special providential intervention and the recent, and distinctive, creation of man in the divine image.



intellectual context. It will be argued that Birks's output demonstrates that the development of contemporary Evangelical theology should not be seen as merely an unreasoning commitment to Biblical literalism - Birks's mentality was much more complex and his work has to be seen to be a part of the wider process by which religious thinkers struggled to accommodate progressively more advanced ways of interpreting nature and society.

### Nature and Providence

The providential theology of Evangelicals does not appear to have had the crucial determining role in relation to their attitudes to science that Hilton ascribes to it.<sup>2</sup> Birks, as a premillennial adventist, did believe in special providences, but he also had no difficulty in reconciling this with his enduring personal interest in science and an acceptance of the 'constancy and unshaken firmness' of the 'laws of nature'.<sup>3</sup> Science, he claimed, besides gradual change, had to account for falling stars, sudden electrical storms and violent volcanic eruptions. These occurrences were 'not infractions of natural laws', but the 'exceptional results of a combination of those laws beyond the range of human foresight, but foreseen and prearranged by the great Governor of the universe'<sup>4</sup>

Two of the major scientific discoveries of the age, electricity and latent heat, also revealed mysterious hidden charges in creation and showed that every drop of water contained a 'secret fire'. It needed, Birks suggested, 'but one touch from the finger of the Almighty', or some 'foreseen and foreappointed

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<sup>2</sup>Hilton's interpretation has been summarized in chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Unbelief of Pretended Science in the Last Days' in Fremantle, W. R. (ed.), *Present Times and Future Prospects* (London, 1854), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation, or, First Principles of Moral Theology* (London, 1879), p. 98.

accumulation of' creation's 'hidden powers' to 'produce a tempest of fire that would consume the whole human race'.<sup>5</sup>

Christian scientists and clergymen alike stressed that true science, and the truth of Revelation, could not contradict one other. If new discoveries appeared to threaten this harmony, then either the particular interpretation of Scripture or the new scientific data must be inaccurate.<sup>6</sup> Birks attacked the 'easy credulity' of 'some Christian men' to 'take up the newest scientific guesses', and to 'sacrifice to them a considerable part of their own faith in the Bible'.<sup>7</sup> Science was, he believed, 'passing through an imperfect and transitional stage' and soon the new discoveries would be freed from 'spurious additions' so that 'the truth, wisdom, and harmony of the Divine message will stand revealed to us with a completeness and grandeur never known before'.<sup>8</sup>

The harmony of natural and revealed truth continued to be vigorously defended against the exclusive claims of the materialist empiricism propounded by scientists like Huxley and Tyndall. Writing in the 1870s, Birks claimed that the 'violent attempt' to clear physical science from the difficulties of metaphysics had failed.<sup>9</sup> He continued to believe that a Kantian epistemology provided the basis of a unified view of truth. Everything was not subject to proof and there had to have been 'intuitions of space' before there could be a science of geometry,

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 87-8.

<sup>6</sup>John Henry Pratt, the Archdeacon of Calcutta, maintained, for example, that 'The Book of Nature and the Word of God emanate from the same infallible Author, and therefore cannot be at variance'. Yet man was a 'fallible interpreter, and by mistaking one or both of these Divine records, he forces them too often into unnatural conflict'; Pratt, J. H., *Scripture and Science not at variance* (London, 1856), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Bible and Modern Astronomy', *Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, vol. XI, (London, 1877), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Birks, T. R., 'On the Analogies of Physical and Moral Science', *Proceedings of the Royal Institution*, vol. VII, no. 58, 24 January 1873, p. 12.

'perceptions of force and power' before dynamics, in the same way that certain of our intuitions concerning right and wrong gave rise to moral science.<sup>10</sup>

### Geology

The problem of the great timescales that were necessary for the deposition of existing geological strata had been discussed since the early years of the nineteenth century. The scientific debates still generally took place within a religious framework, allowing for providential action, at least in the recent creation of man.

This had been reconciled with the literal words of the Genesis text in several ways - Sedgwick, Buckland, and J. B. Sumner, in his *Records of Creation* (1814), had favoured the popular 'gap' theory - holding that the geological strata had been deposited between Gen. I. 1 - I. 2 and the six days of the last creation described in Gen. I. 3.<sup>11</sup> The main alternative was to identify each of the six days loosely with particular geological epochs, a solution advocated by the Scottish Evangelical leader and geologist Hugh Miller, or to equate the days with more general time-periods, an approach adopted by Alexander McCaul in his contribution to *Aids to Faith* (1862).

The Essayist C. W. Goodwin had written a critique of the attempted Christian 'harmonies' between Genesis and geology, arguing that religion was the study of God's dealings with man as a moral being and that Revelation had

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>J. H. Pratt, for instance, accepted the geological evidence for the age of the earth and recent appearance of man. He believed that this evidence corrected false conceptions of Scripture, arguing that the six days work of Genesis were spent in preparing the earth for the appearance of man, and he claimed that the Fourth Commandment alluded to this work and not to the original creation of heaven and earth; Pratt, J. H., *Scripture and Science not at variance* (London, 1856), p. 57. He also claimed that the fossil evidence of extinct species provided an additional 'argument for the existence of a Deity' because 'if previous worlds of beings had existed, from which the present races could not have descended, we have at once a proof that some creative power must have interposed to give a beginning to what we see around us'; Pratt, J. H., *Scripture and Science not at variance*, p. 59-60.

nothing to do with the physical world, about which man could discover everything for himself.<sup>12</sup> Anglican Evangelicals rejected such attempts to reduce the Biblical account of creation to the status of a poetic myth. The divine inspiration of Genesis was believed to be demonstrated by its confirmation in the rest of Scripture, especially the fourth commandment, and its use as basis of the Christian doctrine of marriage and divorce.

Opinions differed, however, on the problem, raised by Goodwin, of the wide variety of possible 'harmonies' between geology and Scripture currently being promoted. Edward Garbett, editor of the *Record*, argued in his Boyle lectures (1861) that the number of explanations did not necessarily weaken the Christian position. It was sufficient to know that there were ways of defending the orthodox view.<sup>13</sup> Birks, however, felt that Garbett's view represented a 'most unsatisfactory' method of defending Scripture as he appeared to be advocating a form of 'double scepticism' that required Christians to be content to remain equally ignorant with regard to both the real significance of scientific discoveries and the true meaning of important passages of Holy Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, Birks argued, it was vital that Christians did not simply abandon their attempts to harmonize Scripture and geology. He also denied the central assumption, made by the Essayists, that it was possible to maintain the doctrinal authority of Scripture if a purely human character was ascribed to the text wherever it touched upon the findings of modern natural science. The integrity of Biblical authors and their claim to divine inspiration was at stake and, Birks argued, if Biblical texts could be reconciled with scientific discoveries, then their divine moral authority would be confirmed and enhanced.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Goodwin, C. W., 'On the Mosaic Cosmogony' in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), pp. 207-253.

<sup>13</sup>Garbett, E., *The Bible and its Critics* (London, 1861).

<sup>14</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought* (London, 1861; second edition, 1862), p. 486.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 309.

Birks emphasized that the Scriptures did claim to be a revelation from God and that the Biblical account of creation, on any other view, was simply a 'manifest absurdity'. Moreover, from the accounts of the creation to those of the resurrection of Christ, Christian doctrines and Biblical facts were so intimately joined that if the 'authority of the facts' was denied then the 'whole revelation' was destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

Birks retained his confidence in the scientific accuracy of the Mosaic account. He accepted the conventional 'gap' theory which distinguished the absolute beginning of creation described in the opening verse of the Scriptural account from the six days of creation that followed. It supposed that the great eras of gradual geological change had been 'passed over silently' in the second verse of Genesis. Consequently the six days of creation represented 'a great work of God, at the close of the Tertiary Period, by which our planet, after long ages, was finally prepared to be the habitation of man'.<sup>17</sup>

Birks maintained that the weakness of Lyell's uniformitarian approach lay in a confusion of the constancy of natural laws with the sameness of the conditions under which those laws operated. The causes now in operation depend on the positions of the elements upon which they operate and these positions 'have changed and are changing from hour to hour, by the action of the laws themselves'. These changes 'in the course of long ages may have been, and indeed in the course of long ages must have been, so great and various as practically to annul the sameness of the law, by utter diversity and entire contrast in the conditions under which it is exercised'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>18</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, p. 99.

Birks also maintained that Goodwin had simplified the scientific debate by assuming a scientific consensus on gradualism, arguing that more recent work by Murchison, D'Orbigny and Lardner pointed to a series of convulsions in the earth's crust associated with devastating deluges, the last of which ended when the last strata of the 'Tertiary' period had been deposited. The Mosaic narrative was taken to describe the subsequent six days work of God and the catastrophe that brought about the Andes and Alps was 'a new creation, complete in all its parts, after an old and incomplete animal creation had been swept away' for 'the advent of man'.<sup>19</sup>

Birks explained the factual omissions in the Genesis account, referred to by Goodwin, such as missing geological eras and extinct fossil species, by insisting that the Mosaic narrative described changes in a common language appropriate to the wants and needs of the time in which it was written. The text of Genesis, like many other passages throughout Scripture, used metaphorical terms like sunrise and sunset rather than speaking of the earth's revolution on its axis or the laws of planetary motion.<sup>20</sup>

He also used this argument to refute Goodwin's objection to the existence of light before the fourth day, suggesting that the Biblical description of the fourth day referred to the first dawn of atmospheric light observed by the creatures of the last and present creation, through the darkness following the final terrestrial 'catastrophe' and heralding the 'first daybreak of a new and coming world'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 516.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 494.

## Evolution

The process of evolution, as Darwin described it, was a mechanical process, with random variations and natural selection of those variants best suited for survival, leaving little apparent scope for divine intervention or purposive design in the natural world. The way was now opened for scientists like Huxley to abandon the notion of a creative designer and many Evangelicals also felt that the acceptance of evolution would necessarily lead to the rejection of the concept of a creative intelligence at work in the universe. Natural selection was, according to Birks, 'a selection in which there is no-one who selects, and no real existence to be selected, and the lives selected for endurance disappear like bubbles in the great ocean of being, as soon as the selection is made'.<sup>22</sup>

James Moore has shown how the theological predispositions and religious attitudes of both scientists and clergymen conditioned their responses to Darwin's theory. Liberal Protestants, whose metaphysics owed little to the intellectual inheritance of Paley and Malthus that had shaped Darwin's work, tended to misunderstand or ignore the actual mechanism of natural selection, and its random operation, but were able to assimilate various forms of providentially guided evolutionism. Scientists like A. R. Wallace and clerics like Baden Powell felt that this approach, presenting a view of a God who was not the personal author of all the cruelty and waste in nature, operating through general laws,

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<sup>22</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, pp. 61-62. Whereas Whewell, in reviewing the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, had maintained that even the most rudimentary living organisms could be distinguished from inanimate objects by the fact that they appeared to be serving a purpose - and that we are unable to conceive of them as being alive without this purposive element - Huxley could now affirm that apparent purposive attributes, such as that cats existed to catch mice, could be explained in Darwinian terms - i. e. surviving cats now existed because they had developed an ability to catch mice well (Huxley, T. H., *Lay Sermons, Addresses and Reviews* (1870) quoted in Sell, A. P. F., *Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1986), p. 162.

without constantly stooping to interfere with his handiwork, gave them a far grander view of the Creator.<sup>23</sup>

It was this type of Christian evolutionism that could be said to have ultimately been accepted, as Chadwick suggests, by most clergymen and intellectuals of the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It owed a significant debt to Continental Positivism, transmitted and applied to the social arena by the highly popular works of Herbert Spencer. At around the same time a spate of new scientific 'creeds' were being promoted which, although they were centred on a benevolent 'Nature' rather than a benignly omnipotent divine law-giver, shared with Christian evolutionism a sense of continuity, moral authority, Spencerian 'progress' and political Liberalism.<sup>25</sup>

Religiously conservative clergymen and scientists, whose metaphysical outlook was far more closely wedded to traditional natural theology, high views of Scriptural inspiration and Platonism, were openly hostile to any form of evolutionism. They saw natural selection in more clear-cut terms, though with little understanding of the sophistication of Darwin's work, and recognized that it was entirely incompatible with Christianity as they understood it. This approach was typified by the scientific 'Declaration' published in 1865 by a group of 'students of the natural and physical sciences' and modelled on the precedent of the clerical declaration issued a year earlier in condemnation of *Essays and Reviews*. The 'Declaration' insisted that it was impossible for the book of nature and divine word to contradict each other - if some interpretations of new data seemed to do so then presumptions should not be made and responsible scientists

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<sup>23</sup>Moore, J. R., *The Post-Darwinian Controversies. A study of the Protestant struggle to come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 217-251.

<sup>24</sup>Chadwick, O., *The Victorian Church* vol. II (second edition, London, 1972), p. 23 ff.

<sup>25</sup>Moore, J. R., 'The Crisis of Faith: Reformation versus Revolution' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, Volume II, Controversies* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 220-234.



must 'leave the two side by side till it shall please God to allow us to see the manner in which they may be reconciled', and be content to 'rest in faith' on points where they agreed.<sup>26</sup>

The metaphysics of conservative Christians, placing a great emphasis on the inductive methods of Bacon and Newton, ensured that they had a philosophical requirement for certainly true knowledge - to be acceptable a theory had to be proved, and to be proved it had to explain all the known facts.<sup>27</sup> Birks, like other conservative anti-evolutionists, was convinced that Darwin's theory represented a mere metaphor, rather than the empirical results of inductive science. It was a 'pyramid of pure conjecture, of telescopic magnitude, resting on a microscopic apex of ascertained and certain fact'.<sup>28</sup>

This belief that scientific knowledge had to be obtained from inductive inference to be credible, was linked with the conviction, owing much to the Neo-Platonism of German Romantic philosophy mediated through the influential work of Louis Agassiz, of the divinely ordained fixity of species.<sup>29</sup> According to Birks, both the scientific data and the 'instinctive feelings of mankind' suggested the 'presence' of some 'specific type or form', either in the 'structure of the plant or animal' or 'in the products or direction of its activity', towards which the 'active vital power' tends 'continually'.<sup>30</sup>

Hence differing Christian conceptions of natural theology and divine providence shaped individual responses to Darwinism and the close interdependence of science and religion ensured that contemporary debates were

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<sup>26</sup>Brock, W. H. and MacLeod, R. M., 'The Scientists' Declaration: Reflexions on Science and Belief in the Wake of *Essays and Reviews*, 1864-5', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 9, 1976, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup>Moore, J. R., 'The Crisis of Faith: Reformation versus Revolution' in Parsons, G. (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, Volume II, Controversies* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 193-216.

<sup>28</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>29</sup>Moore, J. R., *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, pp. 214-5.

<sup>30</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Physical Fatalism and the Doctrine of Evolution, including an examination of Mr. H. Spencer's First Principles* (London, 1876), pp. 278-85.

vigorous, especially as natural selection involved the extension of purely scientific methods into the domain of organic life and, ultimately, to the mind and soul.<sup>31</sup>

Bebbington has contended, however, that the publication of the *Origin* did not, in the decades following its publication, occasion an 'immediate and sustained debate over the veracity of the early chapters of Genesis' and that the 'issue rarely resolved itself into a question of "evolution or the Bible"' until the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> The main impact of Darwinism, Bebbington maintains, was to undermine the rationalist argument for the existence of a beneficent Creator, based upon the apparent evidence of design in the natural world. The impact of natural selection was thus largely confined to those Churchmen and scholars whose education, like that of Birks, had contained a strong element of Paley's apologetic.

The design argument, which had been assumed to constitute the most assured evidence of the existence of God, had, according to Huxley, received a 'death-blow' and its elimination, in a direct and palpable sense, seemed to leave the world prey either to blind chance or immutable law. After natural selection the universe exhibited, Birks felt, 'nothing but a Proteus without reason or intelligence, going through a series of endless changes, without conscious design, or any intelligible end or purpose in those changes'.<sup>33</sup>

While Darwinism did implicitly challenge the historical accuracy of the Book of Genesis, Evangelical polemic, as Bebbington suggests, was not initially preoccupied with Biblical literalism. Nonetheless, Ellegård's detailed study of the

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<sup>31</sup>Ellegård, A., *Darwin and the General Reader. The reception of Darwin's theory of evolution in the British periodical press, 1859-1872* (Gothenberg, 1958), p. 101-5.

<sup>32</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 142.

<sup>33</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, p. 136.

periodical press between 1859 and 1872 also suggests that Darwinism provoked a widespread feeling that much more than the design argument was under threat and that popular views of Providence and of the attributes and character of God were also being brought into question. The Methodist *London Quarterly Review*, for instance, claimed that the impiety of Darwin's theory lay 'first, in denying' God's 'express word, but still more in denying *Him*, the Personal Interposer, the Personal Judge'.<sup>34</sup>

While the intellectual proof of the existence of God had conventionally been based on the discoveries of science, the evidence of His continued providential supervision of earthly affairs depended on what could not yet be explained in scientific terms. It followed that 'as more and more events in physical history were explained naturally, there were fewer episodes to be explained supernaturally and fewer empirical illustrations of God's immediate control over the material world'.<sup>35</sup>

Christian anti-Darwinians were not, therefore, objecting primarily to vast evolutionary time-spans or attacking the *Origin* on the grounds of a crude Biblical literalism. Essentially they opposed the materialism of Darwin's theory and its apparent repudiation of final causes. Wilberforce's famous rebuke to Huxley in the *Quarterly*, for example, written with the advice of the biologist Richard Owen, contained religious objections to Darwin's treatment of final causes and man, while utilising scientific arguments to highlight weaknesses in the new theory.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Ellegård, A., *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>35</sup>Gillispie, C. C., *Genesis and Geology: A study in the relations of scientific thought, natural theology, and social opinion in Great Britain* (Harvard, 1951), p. 220.

<sup>36</sup>Ruse, M., 'The Relationship between Science and Religion in Britain, 1830-1870', *Church History*, 44, 1975, p. 520.

Birks condemned the 'atheistic theory' that described man as an 'accidental development from the fish or monkey'<sup>37</sup> and regarded it, like uniformitarian geology, as completely antagonistic to Christianity. He argued that whenever the Scriptural idea of Creation was 'replaced by one of emanation or development' then divine Revelation, 'or the conveyance of truth from a Creator to his own creatures' became a 'logical contradiction'. Similarly, Christianity's claim to be a special and supernatural revelation also presupposed the Scriptural doctrine of the fall of man because an 'unfallen and sinless' race had 'little need for a long series of miraculous messages and supernatural revelations'.<sup>38</sup>

Birks repeatedly stressed that special Creation was the product of Scripture testimony and 'a priori' reasoning, maintaining that Darwin, and his followers like Spencer, had contradicted the plain teaching of Genesis and inductive reason.<sup>39</sup> They had failed to follow the laws of inductive inference by rejecting the Bible's claim to be the Word of God and its revelation of pre-history, as well as the 'one main inference' of natural history - that like produces like with only minor variations.<sup>40</sup>

Birks also made much of the scientific objections to natural selection, claiming that Darwin and his followers were 'building a theory of the universe on a metaphor'.<sup>41</sup> He adopted an Owenite stress on the distinctive qualities of man in order to refute transmutation. He emphasized the incompleteness of the fossil record and ignorance about the actual cause of species variation, both problems conceded by Darwin himself.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 516.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Scripture Doctrine of Creation, with reference to religious nihilism and modern theories of development* (London, 1872), pp. 209-10.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>41</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Physical Fatalism*, p. 309.

<sup>42</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Scripture Doctrine of Creation*, pp. 232-242.

Herbert Spencer had, with Darwin's approval, created a philosophical theory of human behaviour on evolutionary lines. He also drew on Sir William Hamilton's philosophy of the Conditioned, maintaining that the metaphysical was 'unknowable', and from Comtean Positivism derived the idea that progress was the aim of human, as well as animal, development, with the 'survival of the fittest' being its means of attainment. Spencer's *Data of Ethics* (1879) also suggested that ethical standards were the products of evolution. Spencer's social and ethical theories, and the generalizations based upon them, were considerably more influential in the late nineteenth-century debates on 'development' than the publications of other theorists and his ideas were generally conflated with those of Darwin in the public mind.<sup>43</sup>

Birks argued that, in fact, there was little sign of progressive advance in the physical world and that our experience showed us constant evidence of death, dissolution and decay, in keeping with the scriptural doctrine of the fall. He also felt that Positivist science, with its emphasis upon heredity and environment, could not explain the essence of life - animals and man possessed a vital principle that gave them individuality and directed their activity.<sup>44</sup>

Birks maintained that the activities of God in creation were far from being 'unknowable' and that Spencer could only advocate this proposition by failing to consult the available inductive evidence - scriptural revelation ensured that the divine purpose could be known, at least in part.<sup>45</sup> The sacraments also enabled believers to 'lay hold' on things unseen and eternal and were 'Divine witnesses against the false doctrine which places an impassable gulf between the Creator

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<sup>43</sup>Moore, J. R., *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, p. 239.

<sup>44</sup>Birks, T. R., *Modern Physical Fatalism*, p. 285.

<sup>45</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Scripture Doctrine of Creation*, p. 18.

and the creature, and affirms that of God and the spiritual world nothing can be known'.<sup>46</sup>

### Man

Even those Evangelicals who did not accept the literal historicity of the first chapters of Genesis had striven to hold fast to the common, and relatively recent, origin of the human race. This belief was important for its own sake and also had implications for the doctrine of original sin.<sup>47</sup> While Darwin's *Origin* had not included an extended treatment of man, Darwin had obviously intended to bring man within the natural order. The eventual appearance of his *Descent of Man* (1871) brought the issue of the special creation and spiritual uniqueness of man into the open and clerical hostility to this publication proved to be even more intense.<sup>48</sup>

Darwin showed, in impressive detail, that it was possible to give a plausible, biological and strictly non-supernaturalistic, account of man's moral, as well as his physical, development. He provided a sophisticated view of man's place in history and a comprehensive attempt to work out an empirical history of ethics.

By the 1870s, archaeological discoveries had also helped to focus attention on the Biblical history of man, further unsettling conventional assumptions. The discovery of skeletons in the Neander valley in 1856 had soon been followed by apparent proof that stone tools had been used in the ice age

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<sup>46</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Uncertainties of Modern Physical Science. Being the annual address of the Victoria Institute* (London, 1876), p. 33.

<sup>47</sup>Paul's statement to the Romans (Rom. V, 12) was the source text for the transmission of human sin from a single set of parents.

<sup>48</sup>Culbertson, E. M., 'Evangelical Theology, 1857-1900', PhD. thesis, King's College, London, 1991, p. 81.

and, in 1868, remains were found at Cro-Magnon in France which seemed to be from the Palaeolithic age.

Nonetheless, given the importance of the Biblical history of man for the central Christian doctrines of the fall, original sin and redemption, traditional views were adhered to with extraordinary tenacity.<sup>49</sup> For the sacred history of scripture, with its implicit moral sanctions, to be undermined had disturbing social implications and reviewers of the *Descent* also made much of this.<sup>50</sup>

Evangelical anti-evolutionists continued to defend Biblical teaching on the uniqueness of man, a position that could still be held to be scientifically feasible, especially as Darwin had extended his theoretical conclusions to man without drawing on fossil evidence and had relied on homologous structures and embryonic growth to infer development from lower forms.<sup>51</sup> Once again Owenite arguments were popular, although some writers were also willing to push back the date of the Adamite creation or to accept the possibility of earlier, more primitive, pre-Adamite forbears preceding him.

J. H. Pratt, the Evangelical Archdeacon of Calcutta (1850 - 1871), was one of the foremost clerical critics of the *Descent*. Like most religiously conservative intellectuals he sought to repudiate Darwin by stressing the differences between men and animals. He also maintained that similarities of anatomical structure and embryonic growth were actually evidence of an ideal divine template being re-used in successive creations - even rudimentary and vestigial organs could then be interpreted as parts of this divine plan of species creation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Ellegård, A., *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>51</sup>Moore, J. R., 'Charles Darwin and The Doctrine of Man', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 44, 1972, p. 204.

<sup>52</sup>Pratt, J. H., *The Descent of Man in connection with the Hypothesis of Development* (1871) discussed in Culbertson, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

Birks similarly argued that anatomical comparisons between men and animals only further illustrated the 'immense distance' between them. He defended the fixity of species - animals only reproduced with their own kind, with like always producing like, and our experience, he suggested, lead us 'inevitably' back, following this law of reproduction which we observe in daily operation, to a time when there were few members of each species, and, ultimately, a single pair.<sup>53</sup>

Birks stressed the 'extreme' importance of this question, declaring that the scriptural date of man's creation, seven or eight thousand years ago, was one of the 'main and integral parts' of the 'grand message that Adam was the first father of all men, that in him all die, through a common fall from innocence ... and that all are brought within the range of one great redemption, wrought by Jesus Christ, the Second Adam'.<sup>54</sup>

Birks believed that, given man's social nature, it was scarcely credible that countless generations of men would not have left a 'perceptible trace' of their supposed millions of years of past existence. A 'miraculous process by which men and women had been developed out of apes or monkeys, must have been succeeded by a law of natural sterility and barrenness, and by a further law of preternatural indolence and inaction, so that through successive ages many generations were born and died like ephemera, without leaving behind them any visible and palpable signs of their existence'.<sup>55</sup>

This, together with known rates of reproduction and family size in modern countries, clearly implied that the entrance of man on the planet was 'probably

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<sup>53</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Scripture Doctrine of Creation*, p. 181.

<sup>54</sup>Birks, T. R., 'Modern Geogonies Examined in their Bearings on the Antiquity of Man' in Callard, K. (ed.), *A Scientific symposium: subject, The Antiquity of Man, consisting of papers selected chiefly from the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* (London, 1880), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup>Birks, T. R., *Supernatural Revelation*, p. 110.



not more remote than ten thousand years' ago.<sup>56</sup> Birks also emphasized the essentially speculative nature of current theories concerning the age of the earth and the causes and frequency of ice ages, contrasting the uncertainties of uniformitarian science with the certainties of Revelation.

Such views were beginning to look somewhat old-fashioned, even in conservative religious circles, by the late 1870s. Dean Stanley's funeral oration for the pioneering geologist Sir Charles Lyell, praising the new scientific view of man's antiquity, prompted a symposium on the issue at the Victoria Institute at which Birks's views provoked heated debate.<sup>57</sup>

Prebendary Curry attacked Birks's assumption that those scientists and clergymen who accepted a Lyellian perspective on the antiquity of man were not only scientifically wrong but had abandoned the central tenets of Christianity, implicitly denying the doctrines of the fall and redemption. He pointed out that the Bible itself contained no specific chronology, it had been an innovation of Archbishop Ussher, and also made much of the fact that the monuments of ancient Egypt depicted negroes and other races at the time of Abraham - evidence of the diversity of peoples within a few years of the supposed Noachic Flood - as 'striking proof' that the date of man's origin must be taken much farther back.<sup>58</sup>

J. J. Coxhead declared that there were now too many traces of the existence of an ice age for it to be denied and that this, together with the flint implements found in the glacial drift, proved that man's early origin had to be accepted. Other contributors, including the geologist Callard, felt that these flints

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<sup>56</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Scripture Doctrine of Creation*, p. 182.

<sup>57</sup>The Victoria Institute, founded in 1865 by some leading Christian clergymen and scientists, aimed to investigate 'important questions of Philosophy and Science', especially 'those that bear upon the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture, with the view of reconciling any apparent discrepancies between Christianity and Science'. Birks had been offered an Associate Membership of the Institute in 1873, following his professorial appointment.

<sup>58</sup>Callard, K. (ed.), *A Scientific symposium* (London, 1880), p. 29.

may have been formed naturally and that the period, and extent, of any ice age remained open to question.<sup>59</sup>

Birks, in responding to the debate, argued that the basis of his position was that false interpretations of Scripture could be contradicted by true science, but that only false scientific hypotheses would contradict both God's Word and true, inductive, science.<sup>60</sup>

### Prayer and Providence

The debates surrounding issues like the antiquity of man reflect the way in which science and its application were 'redefining the images and values upon which the culture as a whole had traditionally been based'.<sup>61</sup> Increasing attention was also being paid to traditional Christian conceptions of the workings of divine providence in terms of the role and efficacy of prayer. National debates focused, in particular, on the role of national days of fasting, humiliation and prayer.

Calls for religious services of national thanksgiving following the unexpected recovery of the Prince of Wales from typhoid fever, in 1872, provoked a major public controversy. An anonymous article in the *Contemporary Review* challenged the Christian leaders of the nation to conduct an experiment to determine the scientific effectiveness of prayers for the sick and stimulated intense debate in scientific and religious periodicals.<sup>62</sup>

Birks opposed the increasingly popular view, held by prominent religious scientists and liberal Anglican Churchmen like Dean Stanley, that there were entirely separate spiritual and physical spheres, with prayer being excluded from

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<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32 ff.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>61</sup>Paradis, J., 'Introduction' to Paradis, J. and Postlewait, T. (eds.), *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives* (New York, 1981).

<sup>62</sup>Turner, F. M., 'Rainfall, Plagues, and the Prince of Wales: A Chapter in the conflict of Religion and Science', *Journal of British Studies*, 13, May 1974, pp. 46-65.

the latter. He felt that the physical world could never have been created at all in such circumstances. If a God had, somehow, made a single, unique, creative intervention into the physical sphere, then why would he have done so 'in mere caprice, to fulfil no end' of 'moral government' ? Such a being could only exhibit himself to his creatures as a deity 'self-banished and self-limited by laws which work on blindly, and fulfil no purpose whatsoever'.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, Birks argued, the fixity of physical laws was 'vastly exceeded' by the 'variableness and unfixedness' of the circumstances and conditions in which these laws operated. These unfixed, indeterminate, elements demanded 'the intervention of a designer and Moral Governor' who was in 'ceaseless control' of 'the whole world of physics'.<sup>64</sup> These countless variable elements must have been chosen and ordered by God, Birks believed, in such a way as to 'secure any desired number of later results, of special providences, of answers to prayer' and 'acts of retribution'. They provided 'endless opportunities of pre-adjustment' by the 'daily arranging of special providential adaptations' to each prayer offered by men.<sup>65</sup>

Hence constant, miraculous, tinkering with creation was unnecessary. Given fixed physical laws, the answers to prayers stemmed from 'the whole scheme of Providence' and the divine foresight which 'made all the constants of nature different from what they might else have been, in a way that Infinite Wisdom alone could determine'.<sup>66</sup> In this way God's will had a power over outward nature as plain, sure and familiar 'as the plainest truths of science'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Birks, T. R., *Thoughts on the Sacraments and on the Relations of Prayer and Science* (London, 1872), pp. 80-81.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

### Matter and Force

John Tyndall's Address to the Belfast meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1874) claimed that all nature ought to be regarded as falling within the domain of physical laws. He attached great importance to the role of the physical sciences and, in particular, the discovery, in the 1840s, of law of the conservation of energy, in revealing the uniformity of nature.

This principle showed that the world of phenomena manifested only one force - energy - which could be transferred (into work or heat) but not destroyed. It bound 'nature fast in fate' and allowed no room for faith in prayer, God and immortality as traditionally understood by the Church. Even the workings of the human mind were under the 'mysterious control' of 'Matter'. Tyndall's materialist universe resembled not so much a 'Great Chain as a closed circuit'.<sup>68</sup>

Birks attacked the way Spencer had installed energy conservation 'like a divinity on the throne of the universe', extending it into the moral and social sphere in his *First Principles* (1862), leaving no room for religion except as a vague yearning after the 'unknowable'. Spencer's assertion that 'Force', like God, is 'unknown', contradicted the supposed 'a priori' truth, upon which all science was supposed to be based in the Spencerian system, that the 'wholly unknown' divine being 'cannot destroy one particle of this wholly unknown or unknowable thing or quality, which we call Force or Energy'.<sup>69</sup>

Birks argued that the conservation of energy was useful as a mathematical formula within its own limits but not, as Tyndall and Spencer proposed, as an 'a priori' truth enabling the existence of the universe to be explained without

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<sup>68</sup>Hilton, B., *The Age of Atonement, The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), p. 309.

<sup>69</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Indestructibility of Force', *Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, vol. IX, 1875, p. 293.

reference to a Creator. He took issue, in particular, with Spencer's loose description of energy as 'Force' and pointed out that the basis of the theory was that two different kinds of energy, kinetic (motion) and potential ('force'), formed a constant and that energy was, therefore, indestructible. This he believed to be an entirely fallacious inference.<sup>70</sup>

Both forms of energy, he suggested, varied constantly in the real world and so the sum of both must vary as much as the motions themselves did.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the existence of a multitude of particles in the universe ensured that a 'main part' of the potential energies at any given instant were the 'impotencies', or forces of repulsion, arising from the existence of other atoms.<sup>72</sup> Hence this complexity of acting forces, varying with the distances between particles, 'cannot act at all without distances assigned to the atoms, and in the law itself there is nothing to assign them'. They thus pointed 'upward to the choice of a Supreme Will'.<sup>73</sup>

It was absurd to suggest that each individual atom could, of its own accord, discern its own distance, at every instant, from every other material particle in the known universe and perform its part in the Newtonian system accordingly.<sup>74</sup> The law of gravitation, Newton had demonstrated, revealed how all secondary causes necessarily led up to a great first cause.

Moreover, the apparently contradictory second law of thermodynamics, the principle of the dissipation of energy, seemed to suggest that the universe had a beginning and must have an end. The problem of reconciling the two laws had allowed the physicist William Thompson to find room for divine providence, with

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>74</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Uncertainties of Modern Physical Science*, p. 31.

God mercifully acting, for the moment, to preserve the universe from the 'heat death' predicted by the second law.<sup>75</sup> Other religious scientists put forward other more elaborate theories, including one of the most famous later Victorian attempts to refute the materialist science of the 'Belfast Address', Balfour Stewart and P. G. Tait's *The Unseen Universe or Physical Speculations on a Future State* (1875). In this work, the two laws of thermodynamics, together with ether theory, were used as the basis for the action of miraculous providence - transferring energy from the visible to the invisible realms according to natural laws - acting to link mind and matter, the natural and supernatural.<sup>76</sup>

Birks also argued that the complexity of acting forces could only be reconcilable in terms of divine will acting in a universe of matter and ether. As energy could not be lost it must be spreading through infinite space. Yet this would seem to require a universe expanding without limit which would, Birks claimed, contradict the known law of gravity.

Hence rather than a Spencerian model of universal evolution based on the ceaseless dissipation of energy, Birks proposed that energy must be in a state of ceaseless circulation. Radiant light and heat were merely transferred to other bodies and into atomic and ethereal motion.<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Birks's writings on scientific matters show him to have been able to engage critically with the challenge posed by secular interpretations of natural science. It has also argued that materialist and uniformitarian science were interpreted by Birks and other Evangelical authors

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<sup>75</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, p. 311.

<sup>76</sup>Heimann, P. M., 'The *Unseen Universe*: Physics and the philosophy of nature in Victorian Britain', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 1972, 6, pp. 73-79.

<sup>77</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Uncertainties of Modern Physical Science*, p. 20 ff.

not primarily as challenges to the text of Genesis, but as undermining the notion of final causes, the role of Providence in nature and the spiritual status of man.

Scientists like Tyndall were calling into question the entire notion of supernatural intervention in the physical, and moral, world at all and this had implications for the traditional Evangelical understanding of the whole of Revelation, not merely the opening chapters of Genesis. Birks thus saw himself as defending the plausibility and reality of supernatural religion.

The chapter thus challenges Bebbington's assertion that uniformitarian science merely served to undermine the conventional argument from design.<sup>78</sup> It has demonstrated that the credibility of supernatural Christianity was at stake in the debates between materialists like Spencer and Tyndall and religious scientists and theologians.

Birks's approach to these debates reveals the complexity of his intellectual influences and outlook. The basis of his opposition to materialistic science was a religious world view he shared with the prominent religious scientists of his day like Whewell, Owen and the members of the Victoria Institute. This outlook, it has been argued, did seek to accommodate explanations of phenomena in terms of the operation of natural laws, allowing for divine providential control.

Nonetheless, Birks continued to insist that materialists had to face the fact that the notion self-created matter was inconceivable.<sup>79</sup> He also maintained that the apparent complexity of geological history and theoretical physics could only be interpreted in terms of a continuous interaction between the natural and supernatural.

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<sup>78</sup>Bebbington, D. W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p. 142.

<sup>79</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Uncertainties of Modern Physical Science*, pp. 9-10.

Birks's belief in the plenary inspiration of Scripture, discussed in chapter 10, which distinguished him from many of his Evangelical contemporaries allowed him a greater flexibility in reconciling the discoveries of science and the Old Testament account of Creation. He maintained that the language of Genesis could be understood and interpreted 'optically, with reference to motions and changes, as seen from the earth's surface'.<sup>80</sup> Hence terms like sunrise and sunset 'are not blunders and falsehoods, to be excused in the common people on the ground of their ignorance of science' and 'fatal to the inspiration and authority' of the Bible.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, Birks's belief in a supernatural and miraculous Christianity, which underpinned his views on matter and the efficacy of prayer, reinforces Hilton's suggestion that the supernaturalism and providential beliefs of Thompson and Whewell also enabled them to accept the complex theories of mid-nineteenth century thermodynamics.<sup>82</sup>

For Birks there was a fundamental continuity and consistency in the operations of divine providence that was evident in scientific laws and the geological history of the earth. Moreover, the successive wave of 'catastrophes' and new creations mirrored the operations of divine power described from the opening books of Genesis to the creation of the new heavens and earth in Revelation.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Birks, T. R., 'The Bible and Modern Astronomy', *Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, vol. XI, (London, 1877), p. 17.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>82</sup>Hilton, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 309-311. Here Hilton's argument is difficult to reconcile with his earlier proposition (pp. 22-3) that those Evangelicals who had believed in miraculous providences in the early nineteenth century were totally antagonistic to scientific knowledge. This argument has been discussed with reference to Birks's early career in chapter 6.

<sup>83</sup>Birks, T. R., *The Bible and Modern Thought*, p. 430 ff.



This outlook may help to explain why Birks apparently overlooks the moral objections to Darwinism that had troubled clerics like Jowett.<sup>84</sup> To Birks the destructiveness of primitive life forms formed part of a consistent divine plan that also included the literal physical slaughter of Armageddon. Hence it was not the waste and cruelty of the evolutionary theory to which he felt moved to condemn but the denial of any supernatural providential supervision of the natural world.

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<sup>84</sup>Hinchcliff, P., 'Ethics, Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the thought of Benjamin Jowett and John William Colenso', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 1986, p. 96 ff.

## CHAPTER XII

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented a detailed assessment of the nature and importance of Birks's theological output. It has also considered Birks's thought in relation to the changing character of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism itself and to the wider question of the relationship between cultural influences and theological change.

The approach taken differs from the narrative account of Evangelical thought provided by Culbertson. Evangelical theology has been presented not merely as a negative response to novel scientific and religious ideas. This thesis has, in particular, sought to analyse and to interpret the factors underpinning ideological change from within Evangelicalism itself, as well as taking full account of the importance of external cultural influences.

The thesis has demonstrated the vital role of adventism as a driving force in nineteenth-century Evangelical theology and spirituality - a factor largely neglected by Rowell and Culbertson. Premillennial adventism was a major formative influence upon Birks's theological development and his spiritual and political outlook.

The discussion of Birks's career in Part One of the thesis has established that educated Evangelicals were not, as authors like Prickett and Preyer have

assumed, isolated from the influence of Continental Romanticism. The development of Birks's thought during this period also suggests that historians like Reardon have underestimated the degree of theological change that was underway well before the mid-century 'crisis of faith'.

Part Two of the thesis further analysed the complex influence of Romantic sensibilities upon Birks's outlook. It also addressed the issue of how far was Birks's role in contemporary religious debates purely a defensive one, representing a negative 'conservative' Evangelical position, antagonistic to modern thought. It sought to determine whether Birks was, in fact, part of the cultural and intellectual mainstream, with attitudes and opinions that were shaped by the same influences, and were moving in the same direction, as those of his 'liberal' Anglican contemporaries like F. D. Maurice.

#### Birks's contribution to the Evangelical tradition

Birks was, by the mid-nineteenth century, a respected leader of the Evangelical party within the Church of England. He also took an active role in the main Evangelical societies and, in particular, the debates on Evangelical unity surrounding the formation of the Evangelical Alliance. As honorary secretary of the Alliance he served in an official capacity within the British Organization, as well as participating in international conferences and ecumenical missions.

Within the Alliance Birks was regarded as an authoritative spokesman in matters of public policy.<sup>1</sup> He was often a main speaker at meetings of prophetic societies and at anti-Roman Catholic and anti-Ritualist gatherings. Birks's

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<sup>1</sup>After Birks had criticized a resolution made by the Executive Council of the Alliance to send a message of fraternal consolation to the family of the recently deceased Baron Bunsen, the Council opted to reverse the decision; Birks, T. R., Letter to Editor, *Record*, 14 January 1861.

refutations of *Essays and Reviews* and the works of Bishop Colenso were also published and endorsed by a national Evangelical organisation.<sup>2</sup>

Birks was representative of his generation in adopting premillennial adventism, a theological stance that had been taken up by the majority of Anglican Evangelical clergymen by the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Yet Birks rejected the hard-edged Calvinism and Biblical literalism of the Irvingites and his attempt to accommodate his interpretation of prophetic Scripture to the moderate Calvinism of Simeon<sup>4</sup> led him to develop views on the atonement, eternal judgement and justification which were highly individual.

Birks was a prolific polemicist in the anti-Catholic controversies and was one of the most sophisticated Evangelical contributors to mid-nineteenth-century debates on science and scripture. In his defence of supernaturalist Christianity and his responses to moral criticisms of Protestant orthodoxy he deployed a considered philosophical approach that sets him apart from the stridency of many of his Evangelical contemporaries.

Birks's defence of the plenary inspiration of Scripture forms a striking contrast to the literalist views that were, by the 1860s, rapidly gaining ground amongst Evangelicals. Birks emphasized the importance of determining an author's intentions and original meaning, making allowances for contemporary figures of speech, and, in this respect he might be said to have much in common with Jowett's approach.<sup>5</sup> However, unlike the Essayists, Birks began from an *a priori* assumption of the supernatural origin and nature of Christianity and

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<sup>2</sup>*The Bible and Modern Thought* (London, 1861; second edition, 1862) and *The Exodus of Israel: its difficulties examined, and its truth confirmed: with a reply to recent objections* (London, 1863) were published by the Religious Tract Society.

<sup>3</sup>Bebbington, D. W., 'The Advent Hope in British Evangelicalism since 1800', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 1988, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>See chapter 2, footnote 36.

<sup>5</sup>Hinchliff, P., 'Ethics, Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the thought of Benjamin Jowett and John William Colenso', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 1986, p. 94.

insisted that inspiration was working through the persons of individual writers - rather than being a spiritual response on the part of modern readers.

This approach helped to establish Birks as the most important English Evangelical dogmatic theologian of his generation. In dealing with controversial doctrinal issues he presented carefully formulated interpretations that tended to be ambitious in scope and yet close in reasoning. His theological method, when faced with difficult issues, had been to 'consult the teaching of the whole Bible upon the point, reading it through from end to end with this special purpose'.<sup>6</sup>

Birks was one of the leading Evangelical prophetic scholars and a vigorous defender of historicism. His moderate interpretation of premillennial adventism helped to give Irvingite ideas a new respectability within Anglican Evangelicalism. Birks's opinions on prophetic subjects reached a wide readership through the popularity of the works of Edward Bickersteth<sup>7</sup> and his interpretation of Revelation and of the fate of the unsaved also reached a popular audience through Edward Henry Bickersteth's poetry.<sup>8</sup>

Birks's analysis took a broader eschatological perspective than that of many contemporary commentators. In particular, his premillennialism and prophetic studies led him to criticize the way in which he considered orthodox theology had distorted the perspective of Biblical eschatology, with death usurping the place of the resurrection and vague ideas of immortality obscuring the importance of the second advent and the Kingdom.

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<sup>6</sup>Birks, H. A., 'Preface' to Birks, T. R., *Justification and Imputed Righteousness* (London, 1887).

<sup>7</sup>Bickersteth was, in turn, an influential friend of the political leader and social activist Lord Shaftesbury; Chadwick, O., *The Victorian Church* vol. I (second edition, London, 1970), pp. 454-5.

<sup>8</sup>Plumptre felt that the eleventh and twelfth books of Bickersteth's *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever* (London, 1866) 'are little more than metrical paraphrases' of passages 'from Mr. Birks's treatise'; Plumptre, E. H., *The Spirits in Prison and other studies on the Life after Death* (London, 1885), p. 232. Bickersteth's poem went through seventeen editions by 1885.

Birks was also one of the Evangelical theologians who, by the mid-nineteenth century, were reinterpreting the doctrine of the atonement. His approach sought to resolve tensions within moderate Calvinism by distinguishing between the collective and personal aspects of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. This distinction, Birks claimed, was carried through into the redemption of mankind, as salvation similarly had a personal and a collective aspect with the atonement saving all, including the unregenerate, from the first death and accomplishing the defeat of Satan on behalf of all men, though only the elect were to be granted eternal blessing.

Birks, like Maurice, was concerned to emphasize that Christ's position, as the second Adam, ensured that his sacrifice had a redemptive purpose for the entire human race. Indeed, Birks's views on the fate of the unsaved were, according to one leading commentator, 'as novel and startling in their contrast to popular theology' as any to be found in the doctrinal history of the church.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Birks continued to deny the possibility of post-mortem salvation for unbelievers, although he rejected conventional depictions of hell, and believed that their suffering would be alleviated.

#### The changing nature of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism

This thesis has confirmed Hilton's emphasis upon the importance of eschatological ideas in the development of nineteenth-century Evangelical thought. It has provided a more detailed analysis of the way in which, during Birks's active career, adventist expectations were assimilated into the Evangelical mentality and system of belief.

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<sup>9</sup>Plumptre, E. H., *op. cit.*, p. 231.

The thesis has, however, also challenged Hilton's categorization of all adventists as 'extremists' and it has been argued that Birks's career demonstrates the complexity of the Anglican Evangelical response to Irvingism. The thesis has demonstrated that the Irvingite legacy was a powerful influence well beyond the 1820s and 1830s and discussed the importance of adventist hopes in shaping Birks's theology, his commitment to pan-evangelicalism and Protestant defence, and his political thought.

Birks's published output also demonstrates that Anglican premillennialists cannot be simply characterized as extremists opposed to rational thought. While Birks's anti-Catholic polemic and political works might be taken to reflect the features of millennialism which Sandeen has identified as marking the beginnings of fundamentalism,<sup>10</sup> his defence of plenary inspiration and rejection of the orthodox doctrine of hell seem to identify him with more 'liberal' or modernizing trends in nineteenth-century theology.

Birks's theological output, it has been argued, cannot easily be fitted into Hilton's "'spectrum'" of a theological 'left' and 'right', or 'Recordite' and 'Claphamite', wings of Anglican Evangelicalism. It also defies simple categorization in term of the common "'spectrum'" often used to divide nineteenth-century writers and thinkers into either 'liberals' or 'conservatives'. These schemes of interpretation have been shown to be inadequate because, as Welch has pointed out, it is always a distortion to assume that theological debate 'can be reduced to a direct and unambiguous collision on a one-track line'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Sandeen, E. R., 'Introduction' to *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago, 1970).

<sup>11</sup>Welch, C., 'The Problem of a History of Nineteenth-Century Theology', *Journal of Religion*, 1972, 52, p. 14.

### Cultural influences and theological change

This thesis has sought to place Birks firmly within the cultural and ideological context of nineteenth-century Britain. It has argued that a veneration of the Bible did not necessarily isolate Evangelicals like Birks from the cultural trends affecting other branches of Anglicanism and, indeed, that Birks's thought has to be interpreted in the light of those trends in order to be fully understood.

Both the Coleridgean idealism of Birks's *Analogy* and the tone and emphasis of Birks's prophetic works reflect new Romantic sensibilities. Equally the tense combination of optimism and pessimism that characterized Birks's adventist hopes, his view of the Evangelical mission and his political outlook also typify the Romantic mentality.

Birks's intellectual interests also demonstrate the continued influence of the Enlightenment inheritance upon Evangelical thought. Birks continued to defend the 'evidences' of Christianity and to articulate a rational defence of the supernatural. His criticism of materialist science combined Enlightenment and Romantic elements and typified a world view which Birks shared with his colleagues in the Victoria Institute and many of the leading religious scientists of the day.

Birks's publications on the atonement in the 1860s appear to accord with Hilton's analysis of the mid-nineteenth century as marking a transition from an 'Age of Atonement' to an 'Age of Incarnation'. However, it is important to emphasize that Birks did not seek to denigrate the vital importance of the atonement, rather to present a less harsh and legalistic interpretation of the doctrine.

It is also important to note that Birks's views on the future life were formulated much earlier than this date and, equally, that in the later



nineteenth-century Birks was still concerned to emphasize the harshness of divine judgement and he continued to advocate a narrow and partisan political conservatism. Hence it would seem that Birks's career suggests that the importance of a mid-nineteenth century 'turning-point' in Evangelical thought has been exaggerated and that both the harsher and more 'liberal' elements of his outlook can be better understood with reference to the continued influence of adventism upon him.

This thesis, by studying Birks's activity and publications from the 1830s to the 1870s, has challenged the conventional historical view that Evangelical Churchmen produced only negative polemical works in response to the innovatory approaches of Victorian 'liberal' theologians. It has been argued that Birks's distinctive interpretations of central Evangelical doctrines represented an original and important contribution to the Evangelical tradition.

The thesis has also analysed the ways in which Evangelical thought was influenced by trends in contemporary intellectual and cultural life and how the Evangelical system of belief functioned. In particular, it has studied the role of adventism as a vital motivating force in nineteenth century Evangelical theology and spirituality.

While historians have extensively discussed the Oxford Movement as a manifestation of the influence of Romanticism upon the Anglican tradition, this study has demonstrated that the premillennial adventism of Anglican Evangelicals also reflected Romantic sensibilities and was an important force for theological change. The history of Victorian Anglicanism needs to be interpreted in the light of both these aspects of Romanticism if it is to be better understood.

## APPENDIX I

### The Language of Christian Eschatology

#### 1. The Second Advent

The Biblical concept of time involves a recurring pattern of events in which divine judgement and redemption interact until God's final destructive manifestation. Premillennial adventism associates the idea of the final cataclysm with the New Testament parables of the Kingdom and the concept of a Millennium. This synthesis issues in a belief in a literal, and imminent, personal return of Christ. The second advent will establish the thousand-year reign of Christ and the redeemed saints, inaugurating the prophesied end of the age.

#### 2. The Millennium

The doctrine of the millennium is derived from Rev. XX, 1-10, which tells of the devil being bound and thrown into a bottomless pit for a thousand years.

Premillennialists believe that the return of Christ would precede this event. They also hold that the advent would be introduced by certain signs: the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, the appearance of Anti-christ and the great tribulation. These events culminate in the second coming of Christ, after which the first resurrection - of dead Christian believers - occurs. Christ and the risen saints, together with those believers still alive at the advent, then reign on earth. The millennial reign is to be established suddenly and through supernatural means.

At the close of the millennium, there will follow a final rebellion of the wicked, which is crushed by God. After the final battle with the forces of evil,

Satan is thrown into the lake of fire and the rest of the dead are resurrected to be judged. Those not named in the Book of Life are thrown into the lake, while the rest are granted eternal life in the New Jerusalem which descends from heaven to be situated on earth, where the redeemed remain in everlasting worship of the throne of God at its centre.

### 3. The Intermediate State

The faith of early Christian communities had been directed towards the expected, and immediate, return of Jesus in majesty. The non-occurrence of the advent soon caused bewilderment (I Thess. IV-V) and adjustments had to be made in Christian eschatology, involving the idea of an ordained Messianic salvation period merged with the blessedness of the eternal Kingdom of God. This necessitated an intermediate state between death and the resurrection to judgement on the last day.

There were two conceptions of this state: firstly, the soul remained in a state of sleep until raised and reunited with the body (a concept which drew upon the apocalyptic strand of Judaism stressing judgement and resurrection) and secondly, that the soul was conscious during the intermediate state, experiencing a foretaste of its future destiny (which drew on Hellenistic Judaism and the classical notion of Hades - although the centrality of the resurrection of Christ ensured that an eschatology of the immortal soul could not entirely dispense with the resurrection on the last day).

Yet the parable of the rich man and raising of Lazarus, together with Jesus's promise to the penitent thief on the cross of an immediate entry to paradise, seemed to indicate that judgement and the future life began at the moment of death. St. Paul spoke of death both as departing to live with Christ

and as a sleep before the resurrection and final consummation. These two views were never completely integrated and continued to create tensions in subsequent Christian eschatological discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Irvingism brought to Evangelicalism a new emphasis upon the miraculous post-mortem survival of the body - the belief that to be lying in the grave was not the final state of the human body as it was raised as a 'spiritual body' when reunited with the soul at the resurrection. In the meantime the soul rested in an intermediate state between the death of the righteous and the second advent of Christ. In E. H. Bickersteth's popular Apocalyptic poem *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever* (1866), this intermediate state is depicted as both a state of sleep-like rest and also consciously 'living to God' while awaiting the last judgement and subsequent millennial sabbath.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Heaven

Evangelicals had traditionally adopted a typological understanding of heaven as the eternal sabbath. It was a future blessedness of which the holiness of an earthly life was an earnest, and the eucharistic feast of which an earthly worshipper could obtain a foretaste.

It was perceived as a transcendent spiritual dimension rather than the projection of an earthly life. Evangelicals had emphasized the eternal nature of the Church as the body of Christ and the continuity of the Kingdom from this world to the next.<sup>3</sup>

Through the influence of Romanticism, this corporate and theocentric view of the afterlife was superseded by new conceptions of eternity, stressing more individualistic and personal elements. Heaven came to be idealized, in

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<sup>1</sup>Rowell, G., *Hell and the Victorians: A study of the nineteenth century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 21-2.

<sup>2</sup>Bickersteth, E. H., *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever* (London, 1866), Book II.

<sup>3</sup>Wheeler, M., *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 120.

characteristically Victorian terms, as a place of family reunions and for the recognition of departed friends. John Cumming declared, for example, that, 'It is around the warmth of His fireside that we shall gather ... and, as sure as we gather our Father's fireside, and beneath our Father's roof-tree, shall I recognize and know all my brothers and sisters in Christ'.<sup>4</sup>

### 5. Hell

In Scripture, hell is used to refer to both a specific place of future punishment for the wicked dead and to the place of all departed spirits, without implications of bliss or torment. The Greek of the New Testament texts usually distinguishes between Hades, as the intermediate state, and Gehenna, the place of eternal damnation. Hades receives souls at death (Luke XVI. 23) and delivers them up at the resurrection, when the ensouled bodies of the wicked suffer eternal fiery torment in Gehenna (Rev. XX. 13).<sup>5</sup>

Bickersteth's *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever* depicts the lost as fated to enter a separate prison within Hades, immediately after death, where, beyond hope themselves, they could still see the paradise where the blessed rested, in another part of Hades.<sup>6</sup> At the second advent all the dead spirits are miraculously re-united with their bodies to face their final judgement, after which the lost were to suffer everlastingly in the fires of Gehenna.

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Bickersteth, R. (ed.), *The Recognition of Friends in Heaven* (London, 1866), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>Lightner, R. P., 'Hell' in Elwell, W. A., *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (London, 1993). Hence the penitent thief was understood to have been received 'not into the eternal mansions of the Father's house, but the paradise attached thereto'; Bickersteth, E. H., *Thoughts in Past Years* (London, 1901), p. 307.

<sup>6</sup>Bickersteth, E. H., *Yesterday, To-Day and For Ever*, Book III, l. 620-639. The lost souls await judgement in a part of Hades associated with the 'Deep' described in the Old Testament and the Psalms; Bickersteth, E. H., *Thoughts in Past Years* (London, 1901), pp. 306-307.

## APPENDIX II

The Structure of the Apocalypse

The following diagram is derived from Birks's own schematic representation of his views in *The Times and Seasons of Sacred Prophecy* (London, 1880), p. 131, with additional details drawn from his Letter to Archdeacon Hill (1833).

*VISION OF THE CHURCHES AND GENERAL INTRODUCTION, Chs. I-IV.***1. THE SEALS**

*Kingdom of Providence,  
Christ the Lamb.*

INTRODUCTION....Ch. V, 4-14  
Sealed book

SEAL I.....Ch. VI, 1,2.....70 A.D.  
Victories of Church Militant

SEAL II.....Ch. VI, 3.....324 A.D.  
Discord of Church

SEAL III.....Ch. VI, 5,6.....533 A.D.  
Spiritual Famine of Church

SEAL IV.....Ch. VI, 7,8.....1073  
Spiritual desolation of Church

SEAL V.....Ch. VI, 9-11.....1438  
Cry of martyrs

SEAL VI.....Ch. VI, 15-17.....1789  
Signs of Wrath

Pause before Judgement.....1815

Day of Wrath....Ch. VII, 1-3  
Tabernacles.....Ch. VII, 9  
Ingathering of Church...14-17

SEAL VII.....Ch. VIII, 1  
Pause at return of Christ  
Events unfolded, Ch. XIX, XX

**2. THE TRUMPETS**

*Kingdom of the World,  
Christ the Angel of  
the Covenant.*

INTRODUCTION.....Ch. VIII, 2-6  
**Christ the Priest**

TRUMPET I.....Ch. VIII, 7  
Gothic invasions.....250-365 A.D.

TRUMPET II.....Ch. VIII, 8,9  
Fall of Rome.....365-412 A.D.

TRUMPET III.....Ch. VIII, 13,14  
Heresies of East.....412-565 A.D.

TRUMPET IV.....Ch. VIII, 12  
Eclipse of Eastern empire...565-622 A.D.

Woe Trumpets, 1260 days:

TRUMPET V.....Ch. IX, 1-12  
Saracen woe.....608-1063

TRUMPET VI.....Ch. IX, 13-21  
Turkish woe.....1063-1844

**Christ the Prophet**

TRUMPET VII.....Ch. XI, 15-19  
**Christ the King**  
The Temple opened

**3. THE BRIDE**

*Kingdom of the Spirit,  
Christ the Son of Man.*

Travail of Church.....XII, 1-4  
Seed of woman born.....ver. 5  
Flight to wilderness.....ver. 6  
War in heaven.....ver. 7  
Satan cast down.....ver. 9-12  
Flood from Dragon's mouth  
ver. 15-16

Commencement of 1260 days  
Rise of Beast from sea  
Ch. XIII, 1-10

Sealed ones with the Lamb  
Ch. XIV, 1-5

First angel message, ver. 6-7  
Second angel message, ver. 8  
Third angel message, ver. 9-11  
Fourth and fifth angels, 14-16  
Harvest of mercy  
Sixth and seventh angels, 17-20  
The vintage of wrath

## 4. THE VIALS

### Ch. XV., INTRODUCTION

ver. 1-7  
THE DAY OF WRATH  
VINTAGE

FIRST VIAL.....Ch.XVI. 1,2  
SECOND VIAL.....ver. 3  
THIRD VIAL.....ver. 4,7  
FOURTH VIAL.....ver. 8,9  
FIFTH VIAL.....ver. 10,11  
SIXTH VIAL.....ver.12,16  
SEVENTH VIAL.....ver. 12-17

ver. 5, 6  
THE TEMPLE OPENED

*A grievous sore*  
*Sea turned to blood*  
*Rivers turned to blood*  
*Scorching heat*  
*Kingdom of beast*  
*Euphrates dried*  
*Fall of Babylon*

Ch.XVI, ver. 15, 19  
HARVEST AND

1.Eruption of infidelity.....1792  
2.Anarchy in France.....1793  
3.*Education in arts of war*.....1795  
4.Imperial despotism.....1802  
5.Retribution on France.....1815  
6.Decay of Turkish Empire....1822  
7.Armageddon and Advent.....

## 5. VISION OF FIRST REVEALING ANGEL

Ch. XVII.1-XIX. 10  
THE FALL OF BABYLON  
third woe

## 6. VISION OF CHRIST THE WORD

Ch. XIX. 11-XXI. 8  
THE APPEARING AND KINGDOM OF CHRIST

## 7. VISION OF LAST REVEALING ANGEL

Ch. XXI. 8-XXII. 15  
THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM

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<sup>7</sup>See chapter 1, footnote 38.

<sup>8</sup>Birks was not baptised until the year he entered Trinity College; 'In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, 27 July 1883.



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